

Working titles: LEARNING TO LOVE or A TEAM OF FOUR
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CHAPTER 1

“I want to thank you for taking this course, joining The Project, coming to work with us, or however you choose to think of it. We’ve got a lot to do, so let’s get started. In case any of you haven’t heard what this class is all about . . .”

Several students laughed, and the rest smiled at the joke. Professor Sloan couldn’t keep from grinning. “Okay, what do you want to know? How many people tried to get in?”

Everyone nodded.

“More than twenty-two thousand, around the world,” he said. “Seven thousand in the US. This first year, we’re starting with five classes in the US, and eleven more in other countries. There’s an average of 32 grad students in each of those classes, and that totals out to a little more than 500 students, in sixteen classes, worldwide. This class is following all initial guidelines, which means half of you are history majors. Most of the others have science degrees, mainly in biology or environmental, or in the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, or anthropology. We also have four teaching assistants in this class, and any of them are ready to step in and become active members of work groups, in case anyone has to drop out or go into pause mode before we make our milestones. We also have eleven observers with us, but that’s only for today, and that number will change, in future sessions. Each observer is here in behalf of someone who helped fund The Project. When we break for lunch, do not approach any of them, but if any of them approach you and start a conversation, fine. Be open and honest, and do your best to answer any questions they ask. But, please limit yourselves to answering the question they actually asked. If they want to hear more, they’ll see your nametag, and they’ll know how to find you.

“Okay, next issue. What country are we going to be studying, and writing about? And, for what period of time? The answer is, I’ll tell you, later today. If you read what I sent you in July, you already know that I did not want to fill this group with a bunch of people who think they already know the history of the place we’ll be studying and writing about. We’re not asking a bunch of grad students, most of whom have probably never even been to the country they’ll be writing about, to write the all-time authoritative history of that country, based on what they learn in less than a year. Instead, we’re asking you to go through every other history that has already been written about it, as well as batches of newly-written things that will begin arriving next

month. Your challenge, and goal, is to figure out what's true, what's important, what's the best way to summarize those things, and how you can get them to fit into a larger package about the entire history of human civilization, in ways that make sense.”

He paused for several moments, looking around the classroom. No one spoke or raised a hand, so he began again.

“Okay, next topic. Do any of you remember those essays you wrote, as part of your application to get into this course?”

The class broke out in loud laughter, and several voices called out incredulously, “Do we remember?” Someone yelled, “Do you remember that time you were run over by a cement truck?”

Anyone who applied to be in the course had to describe, using up to 70 pages, the greatest people in history, the worst blunders ever committed, the themes that tie history and civilizations together, the needs and drives that tear them apart, the best books he or she had ever read on history, science, nature, psychology, or sociology, the best little-known podcasts or websites he or she had found, and the most profound and important insights that he or she had ever heard, read, or realized, during his or her life.

By the time someone finished writing a first draft, he or she realized that The Project was asking him, or her, to justify his or her life, and everything he or she had ever done.

And, by the time they were halfway through their second drafts, they realized that each applicant would be judged, not by what he or she thought, or believed, or how much he or she knew. Instead, they would be judged entirely – sight unseen – by what they were writing, on the computer screens and pages they were wrestling with. It didn't matter how much someone knew, or what he or she thought, or thought of himself, unless he or she could put it into words that could somehow reach, touch, and convince someone he or she had never met. If it was good enough, it would change his or her life. Forever. And if it wasn't, he or she would have to live with the knowledge that even his or her best effort hadn't been good enough, to get in.

By the time they had clawed and struggled into their third, fourth, and fifth drafts, most of them felt like they had swallowed broken glass, and the broken pieces were probing and grinding through their insides, cutting up only God knew what. And by then, anyone who was still trying, usually went to sleep every night, and woke up every morning, thinking of how much it would hurt, if it didn't come out right.

And now, the man who was the face of that agony was standing in front of them, with a mock-cheerful grin, asking, ‘Do you remember those essays?’

Sloan waited for everyone to mostly settle down, then he motioned for silence.

“Well . . .” he finally said. “I showed your essays to an editor I know, at a publishing house. He was sufficiently impressed, to want to publish them. We haven't settled on a title, but we're leaning toward *Knowledge, Courage, and Dreams: What Intelligent, Hard-Working Young People are Willing to Work For*. In a few months, you're all going to be published authors.”

The class erupted in a loud, long cheer. Clenched fists shot up in victory, and students clapped and gave each other high fives. Several students stood up, and danced or twirled.

As they cheered, Anne Willman thought about her essays, and wondered whether she wanted them published, and whether she could change some of the parts in them. It was frightening to think her parents might see them. But, as she watched Professor Sloan, she tried not to worry. He looked in control, but relaxed, as though anyone could talk with him about anything. She wondered whether he would look the same at a reception, or a restaurant. Or alone.

He was in his mid-forties, she already knew; twice as old as she was. More than twice as experienced, she thought; he'd been an adult for something like twenty-five years, while she had turned eighteen only five years earlier. She saw his wedding ring, and wondered whether it was his first marriage. If he knew how to get what he wanted, why did he choose one woman, for the rest of his life, over every other possibility? And how old was he, when he made that decision? It would be interesting to meet his wife, she thought.

As he motioned for quiet, she tried to turn away from those thoughts, and focus on what he was about to say.

“If you get that excited over a book,” he said, “I hope you understand how much more important, than just a book, this project is. We’re writing a letter to all of humanity, and maybe even to the rest of our entire galaxy. Maybe even to God, if you choose to think in those terms. If it’s good enough . . . it will be launched into space, and placed on the exact north and south poles of the moon, which is exactly where any alien explorers will look, to see if there might be something there, on a moon with an orbit like ours. If your work is good enough . . . everyone on earth will know that both of those copies are there, every time they look up into the sky, looking for the moon, even if they don’t see it. If your work is good enough . . . it will last for billions of years. Literally. Until the sun explodes.”

He paused to let his words sink in, then he started again, increasing the intensity and drive in his voice. “But actually, it is more important . . . than even . . . that. If what we do is good enough . . .”

He paused again, to make them wait, and he savored the moment, as every face in the room stared intently at him, waiting. “Humanity might also send copies to other stars. They won’t land anywhere, because that would be too uncertain, with too many risks. Instead, each satellite that carries your work will settle into a stable orbit, around a planet that has liquid water on it. It will then beam down, to that planet, what scientists call ‘pi beacons’, with three long bursts, and then one short burst, cycling through a wide range of frequencies, including visible light, and radio frequencies. If intelligent creatures . . . creatures we cannot even imagine . . . have enough sensory awareness, and intelligence, to even just see those pulsing lights with their naked eyes . . . and, if they are smart enough to figure out that each ‘three plus a fraction’ cluster represents the number we call pi, which is the same for every circle, and every sphere, throughout the galaxy . . . and, if they have enough intelligence and technology to be able to send their own signal, up to that satellite, even if they won’t be able to reach it, physically, for thousands of years after that . . . they will have proven that they have enough intelligence to decipher the simplified alphabet, words, languages, and images, which the satellites will then begin sending down. And that is when the orbiting satellites will send down one or more landing craft, if a complicated set of

conditions, which haven't even been written yet, are met.

“And, if they have that level of intelligence, we hope they'll be able to learn at least something, from the lessons, examples, and histories we will be offering them. Lessons about triumphs and tragedies, beauty and greed, joy and agony. The types of hungers, needs, competitions, egos, and drives that made humans into what we are. The nature and types of food, energy, and life on this planet. The sad, sordid history of our endless wars, and how we wrecked our forests, and oceans, and atmosphere. And of how and why we horribly over-populated this planet, and began killing off so many other species that had kept the web of life connected, until we drove ourselves to the brink of extinction. And, since we will be able to send out revisions and updates, both to the satellites on the moon, and to any spaceships that have left our solar system within the prior twenty to forty years . . . we may end up telling them about our own extinction, as well.”

Without pausing, he landed upon and emphasized the word, “But . . .”. He held up a finger, for even more emphasis.

The entire class fell silent, and every person in the room was staring directly at him.

“ . . . other people, who also will be working for The Project, will also, starting in a few years' time, begin selecting, storing, and preserving, for all time, for this entire galaxy, copies of hundreds of thousands of the greatest works of art, as well as videos and explanations of the most interesting and varied creatures that have ever existed, on this incredibly varied, diverse, gifted, and extraordinary planet. We will tell the galaxy about the beauty, kindness, and sharing that our planet, our nature, and our species, were able to create, at least for a while. We want them to see the good sides of who we were, and what we did. That is the other part of The Project, and we all should appreciate the opportunity we've been given, to tell and share that part of the story, and history, of humanity.”

He paused again, and said, “And now, let's talk about what to call what we're doing. The name I use, for convenience, is simply, ‘The Project’. Whenever I write it, I use first capital letters, for both words. Any time I ever say that phrase, I hope you'll be able to hear those capital letters, in a tone of genuine respect, in my voice. I've heard and read at least forty other phrases to describe it, with two of the more common being, ‘The Internet Billionaires Project,’ and ‘The Billionaires' Attempt to Rewrite Human History.’ I've also heard it called, ‘The Final Warning from Planet Earth, Project.’ And, ‘The Desperate Seedpod – or spermwad, or spores, if you prefer – Shot Out By a Dying Planet, Project’ I also invite any of you to come up to this whiteboard, later today, after class is over, and write any other suggested names and phrases you think deserve notice.

“Personally, I don't really care what you call it, in private, among yourselves, your families, and your trusted friends. But, I do hope you will talk about it with respect, whenever you talk about it in public. I hope everything you ever write about it, for any reason, will convey a core and kernel of respect, for The Project itself, and for what it is that we are at least trying to do. Personally, I hope that anything you say or write about it will also, somehow, both contain and convey at least some element of both pride, and gratitude, that you were, indeed, good enough to

be chosen . . . to be one of the absolute first highly skilled and even elite specialists, who are being given a chance to help actually create, and help guide and shape, what we hope it will someday become.”

He paused, and then took off his tie, and laid it across the back of his chair. “Okay, then,” he said. “Enough about dreams and goals. We need to spend a few minutes talking about the mechanics of this course. We meet for two hours a day, ten till noon, five days a week. Mondays through Fridays. Now, I’ve been teaching long enough to know that no matter how important, or vivid, or entertaining, the material might be, not all the students, in any class, got enough sleep the night before. I also learned something useful, and worth knowing, from a man I once worked with, who grew up in Switzerland. Every male in Switzerland has to serve in the Swiss military, and one of the things the Swiss military learned, from trials and tests over a long period of time, involving a lot of soldiers, was this. If a troop of soldiers is going to have to march for a full day, up and down slopes, and over mountain passes that can get pretty damn steep, then those soldiers will do better, and will be able to march farther, and will be able to set up camp and fix their meals in less time, once they finally stop for the night . . . “

He paused again, just long enough to make it a pause, and he held up an index finger again, to help him emphasize the next word.

“*IF . . . IF . . .* they take a five-minute break. *Every hour.* And, that includes the end of the first hour, when most of the soldiers haven’t yet started feeling fatigue. Taking a first break after only an hour, and another five-minute break at the end of every hour after that, will help their bodies sustain a better, more balanced, and more stable equilibrium, and an ability to do more work, overall, over the course of an entire day.

“So, we are all going to take that type of five-minute break, between first and second hour. Now, since all of you will be sitting here, pretty much motionless and inert, for a solid hour, doing nothing but listening hard, and thinking hard, the kind of break that will help you the most, is one that changes the pace, and gives you some motion and exercise. Something that will get your muscles re-activated, and get more fresh blood pumping up to your brain. And, the best and quickest way to do that, in a building like this, is to have this entire class, when the five-minute break starts, stand up, walk through that door, then turn right, which is north, and walk to the stairway at the end of the building. Climb one or, if you prefer, two flights of stairs. Then leave that stairwell, and go to the stairs at the other end of the building. Come back down to this floor, catch your breath, grab one of the small cups of water we’ll have waiting on a table outside that door, and then chat with your neighbors, and try to be back in your seat, by the time five minutes is up.

“That’s going to be a daily occurrence. If it seems weird, think of it as a team-building exercise. Feel free to pair up with anyone, and talk all you want, while you’re walking and climbing. If you’re a real go-getter, feel free to walk down the stairs, to the basement, first, and then climb four flights of stairs. But, I wouldn’t recommend that, this first week of class. Get settled in, stabilized, and comfortable, before you start trying to stretch things any farther. Okay, then – any questions about the break, between first and second hours?”

No one raised a hand. “Good,” he said. “Next topic. Third hour is a group lunch. We’ll have a cafeteria-style buffet in the room directly across the hall. Load up a tray within five minutes, get seated, and start listening quietly, because the food manager will explain the rules. We know your stipends and salaries are low, so we will allow one take-out box, per person, per day. They’re not large, so learn how to load and use them efficiently.

“After lunch, but only today, you’re all going to come back here, to this room, and the computer folks who are working with us will walk you through the laptops and software packages you’ll get this afternoon. Absolutely do not use those laptops for anything else, and absolutely do not load or download anything onto those laptops, unless it is in our secure system. If any of you need a non-secure laptop for other things, and you can’t afford one, send me an email, and we can get you a used one with a newly-installed operating system, either Windows or Mac, as you prefer.

“Now, one more thing about lunch, which also gets into the subject of study groups, work groups, or whatever you want to call them. After two weeks of getting to know each other, you’re going to form teams, with four people on each team. I want two history majors, and two non-history majors, on each team, to keep them balanced. So, I hereby ask each history major to identify and pair up with another history major. And, I want the two of you, to choose each other. Voluntarily. I also want every non-history major to identify and voluntarily pair up with some other non-history major.

“But, there is a catch, for both history majors, and non-history majors. I want each of you history majors to knowingly and deliberately seek out, and pair up with, someone who approaches the study and analysis of history, in ways that are notably different from yours. And, the same with non-history majors. I do not want any two people who pair up, to simply agree with each other. Instead, I want both of you, in any pairing, to become accustomed to, and comfortable with, the process of challenging each other, and discussing and debating points that you disagree about. And one of the best ways to do that, is by actively seeking out, and finding, someone who is different from you, in at least two or three distinct and important ways. Ways that you can, and will, be required to describe, explain, and defend, to me and my assistants, and the rest of the class.

“I am not going to try to tell you how to do that, and I will not create a list of ways that two people can be ‘different’, that I’ll regard as acceptable. However, to help you start to understand this assignment, I’ll offer some examples of factors that I tend to think of, when I say the word ‘different’. One factor, which I offer as a possible example, is, if one of you is male, and the other is female. That is a difference which is hugely important, in numerous aspects of society. Alternately, if one of you is politically or socially conservative, to a point where that is genuinely important to who you are, and how you think of yourself, then you might try to pair up with someone who chooses to identify as a liberal. If one of you went to a large college, and the other went to a small college, that might be an adequate difference, depending on the details. If one of you grew up in a family that was well-off or even wealthy, while the other had to struggle and scrape just to get enough food to eat, that also can be a sufficient difference. If your favorite

authors are totally different, for reasons both of you can describe persuasively, that also might be a valid difference. If one of you has kids, while the other does not; or, if one of you has served in the military, while the other has not; or, if one of you has a close friend or relative who is either in prison, or has spent serious time in prison, or who is struggling with alcohol or drug addiction, while the other one doesn't, those also might be adequate points of difference, between two people who decide to pair up.

“Now, you will have two weeks to make your voluntary selections. We'll talk about this again, after you've had time to size things up and think about it some, so I'm going to move on, for now, to the next topic.

“After two weeks, after you've all turned in your voluntary pairing choices, the teaching assistants and I will pair up two history majors, with two non-history majors, to create study groups, with four people in each study group. I need you to focus on *your* task, and do it the best you can. And then, let me and the teaching assistants be in charge of *our* task. Don't try to game the system, and don't send me any notes, saying that your pair would love to be teamed up with some particular other pair. Just focus on creating your own pair, the best you can, based on differences between the two of you. That is one of your main assignments, and goals, over the next two weeks.

“Okay, let me add another fact, about the study groups. The initial groups are not going to be permanent. The current plan is that they will last about two months, through September and October. During the last week or ten days of October, we will evaluate and discuss how well the teams are doing, we will do our best to learn as much as we can from whatever happened during that time, and we will make any mid-course adjustments that seem necessary and appropriate. If all four members of some group seem to be happy, committed, and productive, fine. I'll be willing to leave that group alone. I'm anticipating that roughly half of the groups are likely to be in that category, while the other half likely will need some adjustments.

“Please understand something that is important to me, personally. I actually regard it as one of the main things that history can actually teach us, if we are smart enough to recognize the patterns, and figure out how to use them, intelligently. It is neither a badge of honor, nor a badge of shame, to make adjustments, in light of things you have learned, up to some point in time. If you happen to be lucky enough to have things working well for you, then find a way to keep them going, along that productive path. By contrast, if you realize that things could and should be better, in some way, then show enough intelligence, insight, self-discipline, or whatever it will take, to figure out how to make the best possible mid-course corrections, and adjustments. Some people get lucky, the first time through. Others don't. One of the key points and principles of life, is that life, and the challenges of working with other people, merely provide different *types* of challenges, to both the fortunate, and the unfortunate.

“The bottom line is that I, with help from the teaching assistants, and from one other person I will tell you about tomorrow, will do whatever we think will give this class, and every student in this class, the best chance of succeeding, during this crucially important first year. That is our true and real goal, and there is no hidden agenda. By the way, we are calling this first year

our ‘See Trials’”. He paused, walked to the whiteboard, and wrote ‘Sea Trials’ and ‘See Trials’.

“That first phrase is a phrase that sailors and shipbuilders use. For anyone here who has never been on a sailboat, we’re going to have a couple of weekend sessions, where you’re going to go out on a sailboat, into Long Island Sound, and learn some of the basics, because there are numerous direct analogies between learning to sail, and learning to be a mature, balanced, and responsible adult. The single most important lesson is, you cannot change the sea, and you cannot change the wind. You can only try to control your boat, by controlling the sails, and the rudder. It’s one thing to hear that, in words. It’s another thing, to actually experience it. And we want all of you to actually encounter, experience, and become immersed in, that feeling, that recognition, and that understanding. So, we know some sailing enthusiasts who have some nice boats, and they’re going to take you sailing. The first two times will be in calm water, in the sound. The third time will be out in the open ocean, when there’s a storm nearby, and you’re too far away from land to have any chance of swimming to shore. So, learn as much as you can, from the first two sessions, and then, actually experience some deep-water sailing, under conditions that can become genuinely scary. Because actually experiencing that sort of fear, can help you better understand what sailing and the oceans are really about, and what drove humans to do what they did, thousands of years ago, despite dangers they understood all too well.

“Now, moving on, we adapted and modified that first phrase, about boats and ships, to turn it into the second phrase, which has become one of our mottos, and, to be honest, one of our defenses. That phrase is going to become how a major part of how we will describe and explain, to the rest of the world, one of the main things we’re doing, in The Project, this first year. We are not going to claim mastery, or any sort of gifted natural skill, at what we’re trying to accomplish, in The Project. Instead, we are going to actively adopt, and use, the attitude that we, too, are learning, as we try to make our way, the best we can, through this first year. And, we have no delusions that we’re going to get it perfect, the first time we try something no one has ever tried before. Instead, we expect to make at least some mistakes, and our duty, to everyone on this planet, is to learn from those mistakes, and be able to do better, by the time we start the next cycle of classes, both here in the US, and everywhere else around the world. We will talk about that more, in future classes, but I wanted to let you know about it, up front, so that each and every one of you can begin trying to weave some strands of modesty, humility, and an actual openness and willingness to actually learn, and improve, based on what you, and all of us, will be going through, this first year. Don’t claim to have the answers. Instead, claim to be willing to do the work it will take, by all of us, to do our collective best to figure out the answers. We’re going to try out a number of things, in various ways, and a number of the class groups around the planet have already gotten approval to do their own things, in their own preferred ways. We’re going to see how all those efforts and experiments work out, and then, we’ll do our best to be open and honest, about seeing and learning as much as we can, from whatever happens this first year, so that we can make whatever adjustments and improvements we think will help the project, in the years after that.

“Now . . . are there any questions about what I’ve just said, other than questions about

whether some particular type of factor might be adequate to meet the requirement of being a real and true difference? There are no fixed answers to that question, so my answer will be, go looking, with each and all of your eyes, your ears, your mind, and your heart, as open as you can get them, and see what you find. So that when we circle back to that set of issues, early next week, any such questions will be grounded in fact and reality, rather than being created and then driven by theoretical anxieties.”

He paused, but no one raised a hand or said anything.

“Okay, then,” he continued. “Still on mechanics. During the first hour of every class day, during the entire school year, we will be working on history. That will never change, all year. But, until certain people decide otherwise, the second hour, at least three days a week, will be about other things. Things that an active working and planning group of skilled historians have agreed that any aspiring historian should know, to make that person a better historian. Better able to understand why certain people, certain groups, certain nations, and in some cases, entire species, such as all humans, have done various things. So, for at least the first two or three months, three days a week, second hour will be devoted to subjects other than history. Things like psychology, sociology, statistics, and biology. Incidentally, we regard evolution as the history of biology. Without getting into religious issues, our position, as historians, is that you cannot adequately understand a society, or a nation, or a city, without knowing its history. In the same way, you cannot understand an organism, or a species, without knowing its history, and how it evolved and emerged into the shape, the structure, and the adaptive, responsive, and mental capacities it has, today. When we discuss evolution, we are not saying it is true, and everyone who is intelligent should or must believe it, and agree with our interpretation of it. Instead, we are saying that, as historians, just as with any other piece of history that happened more than a hundred years ago, we weren’t there, we did not have a chance to see it or study it directly, and we do not and cannot know, definitively, the truth about what really happened. Nevertheless, based on the accounts that others created, and left us, and based on whatever physical evidence we can find and interpret, any good historian can and will try to write, and offer to the public, the best, most honest and insightful account that he or she can manage to create. In the same way, based on all the evidence available to us, and based on free, fair, and open debate about the best ways to interpret that evidence, we believe that the system and process of evolution, as understood by biologists, offers the best explanation and understanding we have, of the history of biology. So, in those second hour sessions, we will be talking, not just about what evolution does to molecules and organisms, but also about how the principles of evolution can also be seen in things like languages, religions, and cultures. All of those things change and evolve, over time, in much the same way that species change and evolve, over time. So, this class will be studying those kinds of things, during second hour, three days a week, until we reach a point where the people managing this project think you understand those factors sufficiently to be able to weave them, with some skill, into the history you’ll be writing.”

He paused, and then asked, “How many of you noticed the phrase I just said, which was, ‘the people managing this project’? Raise a hand, if you noticed it.”

Every student in the room had a hand up within less than a second.

“We’ll talk more about that phrase, later,” he said. “For now, I’m only going to say that, tomorrow, I will tell you about one of the most remarkable women you will ever encounter. Her name is Lydia Watson, and she is the Executive Director of The Project. She is the person who figured out how to persuade twenty different billionaires, to donate twenty million dollars, each, to The Project. For those who are better at history than math, that gave The Project a starting budget of four hundred million dollars. You will find out from her, rather than me, how she did it. And, although I won’t talk numbers, I will tell you that there are quite a few additional billionaires who decided to wait and see how we do, this first year, before they decide whether they’ll join our group of donors. That’s another part of why we will be doing our absolute level best to do the best job we can, this first year. And, it also can help explain some of the rules we created, for The Project.

“For now, I want to make sure you all realize and understand that you have two different positions, and roles, and jobs, this year. You are a graduate student, taking a course, at a university. In that capacity, you will be earning graduate credit hours, toward either a master’s degree, or a doctorate.

“But, the second role is this. You also are an employee. You are getting paid to do this work. And, you signed an employment contract, which is a binding legal commitment.

“The bottom line is, I am your teacher. Or, your professor, if you prefer. Or, perhaps your mentor, if you want one. I will be deciding what grade to give you, at the end of each semester. By contrast, Lydia Watson is your boss. She is in charge of the business and financial sides of the project. I do the teaching, we do the writing, and she signs the paychecks. She is the top executive, and chief spokesperson, for the not-for-profit Foundation which hired you to work for it, and which is paying your salaries. I am entirely comfortable with that arrangement, because it actually works rather well. If you are not yet comfortable with it, then give it some time, and get to know Lydia, because she is, indeed, the top boss at the company you work for.

“Your process of learning who Lydia is, and what kind of boss she will be, will start tomorrow, when I will begin telling you about her. It will continue, the day after that, on Wednesday. She will be here, and she will take over second hour, and deliver her own presentation. She will tell you how the Project reached a point of having a four hundred million dollar budget, and she also will tell you what she plans to do, over the coming sixteen months.

“Now, as a favor to me, I ask that you not spend any time, between now and class tomorrow, looking up things about Lydia, on the internet. You can find plenty of stuff about her, but please, just accept that I will do my absolute best, to lead you to, and get you started on, the best trail for climbing that particular mountain. I will take you to a starting point which will be very much like what hikers call a trailhead, and I will give you a map of that trail. You will get a better sense of who she really is, what she has done, and what she can do, by listening to and talking with someone who actually knows her personally, and who has worked closely with her, than by looking at things that people who do not know her, and who have never even met her, have written about her, on sites like Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter. She is a skilled and

powerful person, who can accomplish a lot of things. But, to some people, she can come across as demanding, impatient, and overpowering, or at least threatening. So, if you can get *your* settings right, when you meet her and hear what she has to say, she can be an enormously helpful, valuable, and skilled ally. But, if you don't get your settings right, before you start, you'll be like a hobo, trying to jump onto a train after it's moving too fast to jump onto. So, let me walk you through what I know about her, and help you get ready. And, that will start, tomorrow."

He paused, and looked around. No one acted like they needed to ask a question, so he kept going.

"Okay, then. Next topic. I'm going to tell you what country we'll be studying, and I'm going to lay out the schedule for the next sixteen months. From now, through next April, over the coming eight months, we will be reading all of the published works that describe and discuss this country, during the time period we'll be working on. We also will be reviewing everything else that will be submitted to us, by groups of screeners, working in and around the place we'll be studying. And, we'll be writing our first drafts.

"The first drafts that will be opened up for public review and comment, will be due at the end of April. You will all get the month of May, with pay, to do whatever you wish, and go wherever you wish. That is part of a calculated plan to disperse all of you students to different places, while the first waves and surges of responses, criticisms, and attacks begin to arrive. I, and the other professors leading similar courses, and the executive team at the Foundation, want us, rather than you, to be the targets of that first wave of criticism and attacks. We want the students, in all of the classes, to be scattered, and dispersed, so that none of you will offer clear targets for complainers to shoot at. That will be the month of May. That will be your vacation month. Your time off. Enjoy it, in whatever way you choose.

"By June 1, this class will gather together, again, but this time, we'll meet up in the country we'll be studying. It's in Europe, and we don't care what day or week you fly over there. If you decide you want to spend May, seeing as much of Europe as you can before the class cranks up again and gets back to work, you are free and welcome to do that. We will pay for the airline costs, for one round trip – economy class, to avoid attracting attention – to Europe and back. And, we do not care when you choose to go there, so long as you join us again, on June 1. We will not be paying for your lodging, during May, but you will be getting full pay, and we have quietly assembled a network of hostels, inns, private homes, and other resources, which will be shared, with you, at reduced prices, if you know who and how to ask. Once we get together again, in June, you'll be provided with paid lodgings, two to a room, and stipends for meals.

"We will spend that summer, from early June through mid-September, more or less together, most of the time. Either in person, or by video conferences that likely will last for several hours, each day, interacting directly with historians and others who live and work in and near the country we'll be writing about. They will be offering and sharing personal, first-hand, face-to-face comments, and responses to whatever we release at the end of April. Then, by the end of September, we will all come back here again, to this same classroom again, and we will spend October through December of next year, polishing and finishing our final draft. But,

understand from the outset that that will only be our draft. We anticipate that the project will not be ready to be loaded into any satellites, until about fifteen to twenty years from now. Anyone, anywhere in the world, will be free to file, on our website, any complaints, any suggestions, any requested corrections, or anything else that they think can help improve our draft. For now, we expect that every two or three years, a group of experts, for any country or region, will go over all the suggestions made during those years about that country or region, and decide which changes should be made to the latest official draft.

“And, so . . . now that you all know you’re going to be spending all of next summer, working in and around the country we will be studying and writing about, it’s only fair that I tell you what country you’ll be in, next summer. It is . . . France.”

A loud round of murmuring arose, and all the students began looking around at each other. Sloan did his best to gauge the overall mood, and to see if he could spot any strong negative reactions. Although several expressions seemed quizzical and unsteady, none seemed to resent the prospect of an expenses-paid summer in France, with a group of like-minded others of the same young age.

After giving them half a minute to shrug, smile, and nod to each other, Sloan held up his hands for silence, and said, “The time period we’re going to be working on, covers close to two hundred years. I started out proposing that we take on French history, starting with the so-called Sun King, Louis the Fourteenth, who embodied the very height and pinnacle of French power, up through the Revolution, and then Napoleon. But, for reasons I’ll tell you about in a few minutes, I was persuaded to stop just short of the French Revolution. Instead of trying to cover the Revolution itself, we’re going to focus on what led to, and created, and caused, and forced, the Revolution.

“And now, let me mention one more thing,” he added. “My initial idea, written up as a solid proposal, was to cover the slow collapse of the French monarchy, and then get into the Revolution, and then try to cover everything Napoleon did, as well. But Lydia Watson, the lady I mentioned earlier, made a single, simple suggestion, which changed everything. She said, ‘That is a nice, good, strong loop, made of good, hard, high-quality steel. But the thing about a loop is this. If you cut out part of it . . . and, if you know the right part to cut out . . . you can turn it into a hook. And if you’re trying to sell a new idea, and a big proposal, a hook can be more effective, and more useful, than a loop.’ So, she and I talked about it, and we decided to terminate our study period, just before the French Revolution actually began. There are all kinds of histories of the Revolution already available, with lists of who was on which committees, what the factions were, what they were arguing, and all that. By contrast, there are only two really good books, about what led to the Revolution, and what caused it, and why it actually happened. And almost nobody, except for professional historians, has ever heard of either of those books, let alone read them. By the way, the authors of both of those books have been hired as consultants, and they’ll both be working directly with this class.

“Then, once Lydia and I had agreed to stop our study period just before the Revolution started, Lydia proved that she knows how, and when, to use a hook. She used that hook to help

her sell the entire concept, the entire Project, to the billionaires. Instead of us trying to analyze not just the events but the meaning of the French Revolution – which people have been arguing about, and analyzing to death, ever since it ended – the billionaires liked the idea of using this class, and our work, to warn everyone in the world about the frightening parallels between France’s dysfunctional government back then, and America’s dysfunctional government, now. The billionaires hope that if we can make those warnings strong enough, compelling enough, and logical, well-written, and persuasive enough, maybe it might help us, here in America, get our act together, a bit better. Maybe it might help motivate people to begin doing the work to pull America out of our own decline, and our own worldwide loss of respect, and power, and influence. So . . . we’re going to take our history up to the brink of a catastrophic collapse. But then, we will leave it there. We will leave it at the place where an entire nation, which, only a hundred and thirty years earlier had been the most powerful nation on this planet, was staring down into a deep, dark, bottomless abyss, knowing all too well that they were, indeed, going to fall down into it, and not knowing what would happen, once they began falling, down, into that abyss. That became one of the most extraordinary and rapid collapses, ever, in the history of humanity. For those who aren’t yet familiar with it, France was the most powerful and prosperous nation on earth, at the midpoint of the reign of Louis the Fourteenth. The man who built Versailles. The Sun King. France owned and controlled more good agricultural land than any other country in Europe, by far, and it was using that land wisely, and efficiently, up until the midway point of the reign of Louis the Fourteenth. As a brief preview of the kinds of things we’ll be studying in this class, up until the midpoint of his reign, as a king with absolute power, he was able to chase, and woo, and bed, absolutely any woman he found attractive. So, that satisfied his longings for challenges, conquests, and victories. But, at the midpoint of his reign, the church pressured him, hard, to stop doing that. So, he stopped, and agreed to begin having sex with only one woman – his wife – from then on. And, he began to become seriously frustrated, by that strict and severe limitation which had been imposed on him. So, he began trying to find conquests elsewhere. Through his armies. And that led to an endless series of unnecessary, unhelpful, and expensive military battles, against his neighbors, which put the French monarchy, and the nation of France, onto a road which led inevitably to bankruptcy . . . both financial, and moral.

“If anyone ever tries to begin advocating the so-called ‘great man theory of history’, they should be asked about how the ‘fallible leader’ factor should be woven into that set of beliefs. Before this course ends, every person here will need to seriously ponder the question of whether, if Louis the Fourteenth had simply been allowed to continue having sex with any woman he found attractive, the entire history of Europe, over the next three hundred years – up to and including both world wars – would have been profoundly different, and more stable, peaceful, and rewarding. But, I will warn you, now, that any answers to that question can only be guesses and speculation, about what might have been.”

He saw the expressions change, on a number of faces in the classroom, but no one said anything, or raised a hand to ask a question, so he kept going.

“Okay, then. Next chapter. New topic. Everyone ready? Instead of talking about the next

sixteen months, let's talk about the coming one month. For the first month of class, we're going to be studying how the best historians did their work, throughout history. The first reading assignments will center around a book called, 'A History of Histories,' by John Burrow. Each chapter is about one – or, sometimes, two or three, if they wrote about the same things – of the greatest and most respected historians who ever lived. We managed to pull together enough hardcover copies of the Burrows book, to give one to every student here. They're in these boxes, up front. Unless you already have your own copy, I would suggest that you take one, at the end of second hour. Make it yours. Write your name in the front cover, and begin writing notes, in your copy, as you go through it. Personally, whenever I read any book, I make notes in the margins, on the pages themselves, and I also create a listing, with page numbers and summary phrases, of the most important notes I write, on the blank last pages in any book. If you've never tried it, I recommend that practice.

“In the Burrows book, the introduction and prologue don't add a lot, for our purposes, so those are optional. Chapter One, where the meat begins, is about Herodotus. He is often called 'The Father of History', because he showed people how it could be done, skillfully, in ways that other historians have been emulating ever since. He created the best early account of how the Greeks managed to fight off the Persian armies, in ways that established a major and world-changing divide, between dictators versus democracy.

“We'll talk more about that topic, later. For now, as a brief summary to help you better understand Herodotus, the leaders of the Greek city-states did not want democracy. They saw it as a direct threat to their power, and as a threat to put true power into the hands of people who did not know how to use it wisely. But the Greeks also knew that the king of Persia was assembling the largest army that had ever existed, and was absolutely going to invade Greece, and use his massive and mighty armies to try to conquer Greece, and enslave its people. So, they desperately needed some way to encourage as many people as possible, to fight the invaders as hard as possible, and as intelligently, cleverly, and adaptively, as possible. So, they gradually had to realize, and accept, that their people would fight harder, and smarter, if they truly were fighting to save and protect their own families, and their own homes, and the things in their lives that they truly valued, and wanted, and wanted to keep. Rather than putting them into positions where they would merely be fighting either for this dictator, or that dictator, they gave, to the mass of people, some genuine and actual power over their own lives. They gave that power to the people who would actually be doing the fighting, and the dying, and the suffering, and the grieving. And, even though democracy meant giving power to those who were least able to use it skillfully, the simple and unavoidable fact was that the efforts of those lowest classes of people, the lowest ranks but largest numbers of the soldiers who would actually be fighting the battles, would be absolutely crucial, in determining the outcomes of the battles that were approaching. So, democracy was the strategy the Greeks came up with, to encourage as many people as possible, to do the best they could do, to fight for their own families, and homes, and children. You'll be better able to understand Herodotus, if you understand that concept. Democracy was created, not out of generosity, or some benevolent desire to share power with others. It was created out of

desperation, and only because a gigantic, world-threatening attack, by a nearby dictator, had become inevitable, and undeniable. Plain and simple.

“Okay, that’s all I’ll say, for now, about the Burrows book, or the Herodotus readings that will be in your emails tonight. You need to log into our website, every single night before we have a class the next day. Which means, on Friday and Saturday nights, and the night before a holiday, no need to check it. I will not post anything after 6 pm, so if you log in at any time after six, you’re fine for the night. Our system is programmed to check logins, and to generate a listing on any student who did not log in, on any night. So, take that requirement seriously. In tonight’s batch, you’ll find a two-minute video, and a list, both from me, explaining more about the Herodotus readings, as well as a five-minute video and a list of rules about the food service, including the carryout boxes you can take home with you, each day. There is a first chat room, for all students, teaching assistants, and me. There also is a second chat room, for only you students. We fully realize that if intelligent and hard-working people have complaints, criticisms, or whatever, it’s better to give them a good way, and a good place, to air those complaints, and to be able to discuss them, quietly and confidentially, with others, rather than letting some type of internal pressure build up until something breaks or bursts. Neither I, nor anyone on the staff, will ever go looking into that chat room, but also understand that, if some student thinks something has reached a point where they should copy it and show it to us, they can do so. So, use discretion, and if you want, set up an agreement to go have a private exchange on some other network. You can trade names on that network, and decide whether you want to get together in person, to talk about something. Absolutely do not ever, for any reason, give away any information that would allow any other person to get into either of those chat rooms, and absolutely do not ever, for any reason, copy anything from either chat room and post it any place outside of our private network. If we ever suspect you did either of those things, we will call you in for some questioning. If you did something wrong, and you tell us the truth about it, you will be docked three hundred dollars, out of your stipend, for a first offense, six hundred dollars for a second offense, and terminated and tossed out of the program, for a third offense. Also, if you ever lie to us, about something you did, you will be terminated, and tossed out of the program, even if it is just a first offense. You’re all grad students, fully through college, and well into your twenties. You are mature enough that we simply will not tolerate any of you lying to us, based on some claim that you didn’t realize that what you were doing was wrong. We are doing our absolute best to be honest with the public, and we need for you to do your absolute best to be honest with us, so we can do what we need to do. When Lydia is here, she will tell you some things about various types of opposition and threats that The Project has already encountered, and about various people and groups with their own goals and agendas, which have already begun trying to exert their own special types of control over what we’re going to be writing, and even to hijack The Project completely, so they can control it, while we pay for it. We are already fighting those battles, we have the right people doing that work, and we absolutely do not want any students, at any time, for any reason, to become entangled in those issues and conflicts. So, keep things private and discrete between yourselves, and be honest with the staff here, including me, at

all times.”

Everyone in the room was staring at him, quietly and intently, and he knew he didn't need to do anything special, to shift into a new topic.

“Okay,” he said, calmly. “Enough about procedures and assignments. Let's get into some history. The early history of France. We will not be writing about this period, but we need to understand how it created various factors that led to the times we will be studying. For today, let's start at a logical starting point, and we'll take it up to a major transition, which was the fall of Rome, in 410 AD. Tomorrow, we'll cover a span of time after the fall of Rome, up through the Battle of Tours. That was not an especially large battle, and no one knew at the time how important it would turn out to be. But, that was where the northern Europeans defeated the Muslims, or Moors, who had conquered Spain, and were working their way north. It turned out to be a crucial battle, because that was where the northern Europeans stopped the advance of the Moors, and persuaded them to go back south, again, without returning. The Moors basically decided it was just too cold for them, that far north, so screw it, let's go back where it's warm. Regardless, that battle marked their northern-most encroachment, and the follow-ups to that battle pushed them back into Spain, where they stayed until 1491. Another major milestone in the history of Europe, which we'll get to, later.

“Now . . . as a logical starting point to begin the history of what later became France, let's start with five-point-three *million* years ago. Does anyone here know why I chose that point in time?”

Several students raised their hands, and he pointed to one of them.

“That was when the Mediterranean basin flooded, with sea water,” she said.

“You are correct. What was it, before then?”

“A basin, below sea level, where rivers went to die. Or, more precisely, to evaporate. Basically, it was the northern part of the Sahara Desert. The rivers left behind a layer of super concentrated salt, which nothing could live on, and which now lines the bottom of the Mediterranean, just below the silt. That layer of salt helped geologists figure out what happened.”

“Good, and correct, again. How did that basin flood?”

“A mountain ridge between Gibraltar and Morocco gave way, and as water from the Atlantic began pouring through that breach, it eroded and enlarged that gap, so that more and more water came in, and eventually that water became the newly formed sea.”

“How long did that take?”

“No one knows. It likely was at least a hundred years, but it could have been more than a thousand.”

“Right again. Very good. Okay, that created the southern coast of France. It also shifted France, and indeed most of Europe, into a new and different era of climate and weather. For anyone who has never been to Italy, and who has wondered how and why Italy became the seat of a huge and powerful empire, it's because it is naturally air-conditioned, to a pretty much perfect level. It's far enough south, like Spain, to be warm, and even hot. But, the winds that blow across the relatively cold Mediterranean waters, and then bring that coolness onshore, become cool and

refreshing breezes that make the climate pretty much perfect, even in the heat of summer, and even in the cold of winter. That massive, world-changing event, when the Mediterranean Sea formed, occurred when the apes that eventually became humans were just beginning to split off from the chimpanzees, down in Africa. To the best of my knowledge, no hominid bones older than the Mediterranean Sea have ever been found in Europe. The apes that began walking on two long legs, which enabled them to leave the trees of African jungles, and begin migrating north over long distances, had not yet arrived, back then.

“Jumping ahead, France eventually became the largest nation in Europe. But, for more than a million years before things called ‘nations’ were created and recognized, one can fairly argue that France had already become the center, and the most important part, of Europe. Partly because it stretched across an ideal zone and lands for edible plants, which led to large mammals, and eventually agriculture. The area that is now France had more good land that was well-suited for all of those, than anywhere else in Europe. And, partly because France had to deal with, and figure out how to absorb, withstand, and in some cases benefit from, repeated arrivals, invasions, and attackers, along four different but all critically important coastlines – the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the English Channel, and the North Sea. The more you know about them, the more you will realize that those were, and still are, today, four very different coastlines. Only about four or five nations, on this planet, have four different coastlines. And, with Australia as the only exception, since its land and climate cannot support enough people to create a true empire, every nation that has ever had four or more different coastlines, on four different oceans or seas, became a truly powerful empire. Or, you can flip that statement around, in terms of what was the cause, and what was the effect. No nation ever became strong enough to establish control over four different coastlines, unless it was already well on its way to becoming a truly powerful empire.

“Okay, now I want one of you history majors to come up here, and tell the class whatever you know about the history of either France, or northern Europe more generally. Start with pre-history, and take us through the Roman invasions, up until 410 AD, when the city of Rome was sacked. And, since we all know you didn’t have any chance to prepare for this task, we will use whatever you say, mainly as an exercise in listening, and tolerance, and how to create a first draft, and then work on a first draft, until we turn it into a polished draft. And, if two people volunteer, I’ll bring both of you up here, and let you bounce things off each other, and see what you can do as a team.”

It took several long seconds before anyone would raise a hand, but eventually, a woman sitting near the back gingerly began to raise her hand. Sloan motioned to her to come up front, and as she stood up and walked forward, two other students raised their hands to join her.

“I’m sorry,” Sloan told those students, “but you waited too long. I’ve decided we all need to focus on her.” He turned toward her and said, “Okay, while you are talking, I’ll be taking notes on the whiteboard.” Then he turned to the rest of the class and said, “The rest of you – while she’s speaking, do two things. First, let her finish. Do not interrupt, ask a question, or raise your hand to try to ask a question, until after she finishes. If you’re dying to jump in with a question or comment, jot down a note to yourself. If it’s a major point, one or two key words should be all

you need, to help you remember it. And, if one or two words aren't enough, maybe it wasn't such an important point after all.

“Second – while she talks . . . *listen . . . to . . . what . . . she . . . says*. Do *not* start modifying and replacing what she says, with what you think, or how you interpret something. Listen to *her*. Listen, closely enough so that you can accurately summarize what she actually said. Your assignment, due at the start of class tomorrow, and do not discuss it or share a draft with anyone else, is to write a three-page summary of whatever she says, during what I hope will become about twenty minutes, before any questions are asked. Use one-point-one-five line spacing, which will always be our default line spacing for anything we write in this class. In that summary, spend the first two and a half pages, simply describing *what she said*. Not what you think, or what you wish she had said, or think she should have said. I do not want your version of the early history of what happened, in the place that eventually became France. Instead, I want an accurate summary of what she says. I want you to prove that you were listening, carefully, to her. It's that simple. If you want to add anything else, or point out any mistakes she made, then do so under the heading, 'My Comments', on the bottom half of page three.”

The class stared at him. Their expressions ranged from slack-jawed disbelief, to grim determination, but most seemed to register a calm understanding of what he was asking for, and why he was asking for that.

“That is how I want you to listen, whenever anyone talks, in this class, or in a work group,” Sloan said. “Personally, I'd recommend that approach, any time you ever talk with anyone, in private. But, I don't want anyone complaining that I'm telling you how to live your private lives. If I didn't tell this whole class not to interrupt her, then I can promise, some of you would be raising your hands within two minutes, wanting to prove you know more than she does. That is not the way to understand someone. And, it's not the best way to work with other people, if the two of you are trying to find ways to work together productively, and happily. So, simply listen to what she says, until she's finished. If it helps, think of the Golden Rule. Give her the same kind of attention you would like people to give you, when you talk. A half dozen times during the course of this semester, I'll give pop quizzes, and everyone in this class will have to write down a summary of what someone just said. Those pop quizzes will *not* ask you to describe some point of history. Instead, they will ask you to describe *what someone just said*. And the only way to do well on those types of quizzes, is by listening to what other people say.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, then someone loudly whispered, “I hear cars outside.”

The class broke up in laughter, and began applauding. Sloan grinned, and when they had quieted down, he said, “That was good. As every historian knows, there's so much pain and tragedy in this world, a sense of humor is absolutely vital. So, I'll try not to penalize it too heavily. Okay, let's get started. She'll give a twenty-minute overview, then we'll all take our first five-minute break, and march up and down some stairs. And then, we'll spend second hour, discussing what she said, about the early history of France. Miss, would you please introduce yourself? Tell us who you are, where you grew up, what kind of work your parents do, or did, where you went to college, and why you are here with us, today. Then tell us about early France.”

A hand in the front row shot up. It trembled so hard everyone could see it, as though its owner was absolutely desperate. As he squirmed at his desk, he looked like a freshman instead of a grad student. Sloan wondered what was wrong and gestured toward him.

“In the summary we’re supposed to write,” the student said, “are we supposed to say who she is, and why she’s in this class?”

Several students began to laugh, reluctantly, as though they were trying to hold it in. But then, several more students also began laughing, and within ten seconds, the entire class was laughing.

When he heard everyone laughing, even Sloan had to smile. As soon as it was quiet enough, he said, “I don’t know why that was so funny. So, let me use it to find out something about each of you. I want each of you to decide the answer to that question – the question he just asked – for yourself. You choose, and then, write down whatever you think I asked for. At the start of your summary. Maybe that’ll help teach you not to laugh so hard, when someone just asks a question. Personally, I think that was a *very* good question.”