Satisfaction. Let’s be honest, if Mick Jagger can’t get it, why should I expect to? With his money, talent, women, money, and ravishing good looks, he holds several advantages over me, so my chances must be somewhat nonexistent. After four years of college, a typical person might feel “satisfied” with having completed a degree, received good grades, or something like that, yet I feel nothing. In fact, I have only recently begun to reconsider, rediscover, and fully understand for the first time exactly what satisfaction means outside of a dictionary or a forty-year-old lyric.

I understand satisfaction to have two parts. First, someone must have completed something to feel satisfied. There can be no satisfaction in watching the world pass by: enjoyment, yes, but satisfaction, no. For some this can be acing a test, tearing it up on the court, performing Mozart to perfection, or acquiring a rare piece for a collection. In high school, I took great satisfaction in the most mundane, and probably most irrelevant, category: grades. I liked to do well in school because it made me feel good. It validated the time and the effort I put forth, and I liked knowing I hadn’t wasted my time. Come graduation, I probably could have continued my education at an elitist college instead of a merely elite university. I obviously chose the University of Illinois and have few regrets.

Somehow, though, my college experience has made me reconsider not only the academic and social aspects of life, but also what I want out of it. Everyone seemingly wants a job, a family, 1.8 kids and Fido lapping at their heels and soiling the carpet, but those are exterior considerations. When I think about life, I think about what I want to be: an altruistic person who dedicates his life to helping people or a somewhat more self-concerned one who makes a profit and spends it on his friends and family? Do I want contribute to the “ongoing discourse of history,” as my professors might say, watch it on the history channel, or belch and go eat a second Big Mac? Do I want to mentally retire or drive the hard road daily?
While I am still unsure as to where exactly I would like to end up, I think I have figured out the answer to the path, which relates to the second criterion of the elusive emotion. Satisfaction necessarily requires conquering some kind of challenge. Intellectual, physical, or emotional challenges are all equally valid and can lead to a deep, visceral satiation, despite some snobbery that may subordinate one type or another. Some of the greatest satisfaction I have ever felt results from athletic competition: playing well in volleyball; beating my dad in racquetball; pitching six shutout innings in the softball league championship game. Likewise, intellectual challenges have netted me similar feelings: nailing my freshman physics final; acing one of the most challenging classes on campus; gaining acceptance into Phi Beta Kappa (because I could almost write an essay without employing a little flattery?). Inevitably, though, the greater the challenge, whatever the type, the more satisfying the emotion is after achieving the goal.

This notion of satisfaction came to me this past spring break, when I had a number of academic tasks to complete along with a volleyball tournament and some major work to do on my car. Unsurprisingly, I was blessed with strep throat the first weekend so I accomplished considerably less homework than originally planned (at least I had an excuse, though!). I did, however, still face the dilemma of my car’s transmission sitting in my basement, 160 miles from Champaign. After spending my last full day of good health removing it, I became too sick to continue replacing the clutch for a couple days. Eventually, I got everything back together without too many leftover parts. As I was finishing the work, my parents congratulated me on the achievement. To be honest, I did not understand why it was so significant: my car needed work; I didn’t have the money to pay someone else to do it; therefore, I did it myself. Nonetheless, they were proud.

The more I thought about it though, there was a strange feeling, a unique rush, as I turned the key, started the car, heard the thunder of the British engine coughing to life, and tested my new
clutch in the cold spring night. I think I was more amazed nothing exploded than anything else, but the increased blood flow to my already swollen head was that elusive emotion of satisfaction. I had replaced the clutch on my car with no more knowledge than that from a badly written book! I smiled inside and rejoiced in the silence of my usually noisy transmission as I rowed through the gears in the garage. This was what satisfaction was, not the grades, the scores, the numbers, or anything else: achieving something palpable. I had found the elusive emotion and it was, in fact, closer to the feeling of winning in sport than receiving a good grade, more proximate to objective accomplishment than to subjective evaluation.

Now that I had experienced a unique sense of satisfaction, I turned my thinking once again to the future. Down what road do I find the most satisfaction? Is it right to pursue satisfaction? Are many small, satisfying events more beneficial than a few greatly satisfying ones? And I thought back on my college career and how it had been, while not satisfaction-free, lacking in the feeling I had just experienced. Why?

In college I looked for the answers in the wrong places. I wanted to learn what I was going to do, what I was going to achieve, in a classroom. I wanted a professor to tell me, “Once done with my class you will know how to be a politician/doctor/scientist/decent human being/teacher/engineer.” College taught me that answers do not come that simply. College showed me that if they did, life would be boring and unemotional. There would be no challenge and without challenge, of course, there can be no satisfaction.

I therefore choose difficulty. There is always an easy way out that will net similar tangible results, but what I have learned through experience could only have been gained through experience. The intangibles, therefore, are what enrich living. Taking on risks and challenges and succeeding brings satisfaction while failing brings further knowledge of how to do it right the next time.
I used to honestly believe that certain challenges would kill me. Too much stress, too much homework, too little time—together they would, like the Power Rangers, unite to vanquish my existence. However, free time is boring. I like doing things and I like being challenged. My friends have achievements, athletic and intellectual, that I could never hope to perform; this used to make me a combination of jealous and depressed. Post-realization (as I have now taken to calling my Enlightenment-esque state), I ask myself why can I not at least try. If I fail, I will have learned something, both about myself and about the task. If I succeed, I get some satisfaction. It’s like a narcotic; it is addicting and fleeting and the high it produces vaporizes rapidly. This fuels further investigation and an increased pursuit of challenge.

In my quest to take the difficult road to nowhere, I have learned that most people elect the opposite. Society always looks for a free pass and a way to sidestep responsibility, difficulty, and challenge. In many ways, this leads to innovation and technological development, which benefits all, but I wonder whether we are all better off now than we were fifty or hundred years ago. Certainly, we have more cures and more knowledge, but I see a lack of progress on the big problems: corruption, poverty, equality, and others. I see our world as too afraid of the problems, too afraid of the difficulties, to undertake the steps necessary to purge society of the negative morals and attitudes that underlie the life’s misfortunes. I can only hope that future decades bring a desire to rectify such problems and that people do not shun challenge out of fear, but face it and embrace the satisfaction surmounting it.

It took me twenty-two years to realize it, but largely all people are equal. One person’s opinion does not make it fact, despite their arrogant belief to the contrary. When facing continuous challenges, I cannot expect to conquer them all. What I have learned in college and in life is that there is no shame in failure, only in the fear of it. Whatever difficulties faced, whatever problems along the way, the feeling at the end, when all is well and the sun shines again, validates all the blood
and time and angst expended. I choose the hard road, and if my clutch breaks halfway there, at least I know how to fix it.