'Some of the More Mundane Moments in Life Make Great Essays'

By DAVE MARCUS

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Here's an essay that's sure to make an admissions officer reach for the triple grande latte to stay awake:

"I spent [choose one: a summer vacation/a weekend/three hours] volunteering with the poor in [Honduras/ Haiti/ Louisiana] and realized that [I am privileged/I enjoy helping others/people there are happy with so little]."

Yes, the admissions folks have read it before. Many times.

"I would love to have a student answer the question, 'Why is it that you have everything and they have nothing?'" said Cezar Mesquita, admissions director at the College of Wooster. "Or 'What did others learn from your participation in the trip?'"

For many seniors, choosing the topic for a personal statement is more difficult than actually writing the piece. But don't fret. "Some of the more mundane moments in life make great essays," Christopher Burkmar, Princeton University's associate dean of admissions, assured guidance counselors at a conference last month.

For example, Mr. Burkmar said he had recently savored a few hundred words about a family's dinner conversations.

"The best essays make us laugh, cry or wince," said Matthew Whelan, Stony Brook University's assistant provost for admissions and financial aid. "They help us understand why we want the applicant here."

One of Mr. Whelan's current favorites: "The young man who puts his siblings on the bus in the morning because both parents are working, then gets them off the bus, cooks them dinner and helps with homework because both parents are still working."

At times, taking a risk pays off. Stacey Davey, associate director of admissions at Adelphi University, said she was impressed by the raw prose of a girl who battled an eating disorder. She wrote a letter to her former best friend — it was addressed to her skinny jeans. "She realized that getting into them was self destructive."
Humility is often attractive. The Rochester Institute of Technology was intrigued by a valedictorian who wanted to take an arc welding class in high school. Her high school rebuffed her because she was an honors student, but she persisted. On the first day of class, she burned her hand.

"I remember the essay, her name and her school from 17 years ago," said Robert Springall, who was at R.I.T. at the time and is now Bucknell University's admissions dean.

On the other hand, Mr. Springall was working at Cornell when an applicant revealed that while waitressing she got angry at a customer and spit in his food before serving it. "Immediate red flag," Mr. Springall recalled. "She makes poor choices."

Denied.

Last winter, I spent a week observing a Stony Brook admissions officer as he pored over applications. I was struck by the number of students rhapsodizing about expensive travel or service projects in exotic locales, seemingly unaware that classmates were pinched by a recession.

Also avoid breezy David Letterman "Top 10" lists, which raise more questions than they answer, said Jennifer Fondiller, admissions dean at Barnard College.

Some subjects are inappropriate. A few years ago, a top student applying to Texas Christian University reminisced about torturing frogs when he was younger. The admissions dean, Raymond Brown, kept reading, hoping for at least a few words of apology or epiphany. Nothing.

The applicant was rejected.

"Probably not a good choice of topic," Mr. Brown explained, "when you're applying to a school whose mascot is a frog."

Have you got essay advice to pass on, borne of personal experience or otherwise? Use the comment box below to let us know.

Mr. Marcus is the author of "Acceptance: A Legendary Guidance Counselor Helps Seven Kids Find the Right Colleges — and Find Themselves" (Penguin Press), and a former education reporter at Newsday and U.S. News and World Report. At the end of this month, he will take on a new post directing public relations for the New York Institute of Technology.