Jonah Bossewitch

Columbia Journalism School - Ph.D. Application

Essay A: Autobiographical Essay

Depending on how playful I am feeling I will sometimes introduce myself as an alchemist. There is a trivial explanation for this remark, which is all that I usually offer. In my role as a software developer I literally conjure up symbols from the aether and assemble them in an information hierarchy where they, in turn, control and manipulate metallurgic elements in the external world. While this formulation accurately describes my work, my identification with alchemy also communicates other layers of meaning, suggesting metaphysical transformations and esoteric perspectives.

Carl Jung understood alchemy as a symbolic system meant to represent the journey from a leaden consciousness to a golden one. When combined with the Hermetic principle which stipulates that everything in our inner world is mirrored and paralleled in the outer world, we arrive at an alternative understanding of alchemy that is both practical and meaningful. I sometimes imagine the medieval alchemists carving out small corners of the external world, typically through a craft, where they labored to introduce elegance, harmony, and beauty. According to alchemical principles, this work would necessarily entail a corresponding inner transformation.

This narrative may simply be a fanciful way of expressing the idea that if you love what you do you will become a better person for it. I love what I do. I am passionate and enthusiastic and embrace life’s challenges with delight. It is difficult for me to distinguish between my work, studies, and hobbies, as together they are becoming my life-work.

Education and learning have always been a primary focus of my social and intellectual pursuits. Both of my parents were educators, and my schooling instilled the value of education for its own sake. Growing up in New York City and traveling extensively around the world has also greatly expanded my worldview. The exploration and exchange of knowledge continues to be an ongoing source of personal accomplishment.

My academic training has followed a strong analytical tradition, and I have cultivated a devotion to science, the scientific methodology, as well as emerging technology. This combination has translated well to the domain of software architecture and development, but my satisfaction in applying these talents is highly contingent upon the setting. I truly thrive when my work is directed towards constructive, meaningful goals with humanistic consequences.

At Princeton this focus was articulated through my dialogue with Cognitive Science, where questions concerning the nature and limits of knowledge, learning, and creativity shaped my studies. On the philosophical side I was engrossed by epistemology, particularly the dialectic as a strategy for discovering the truth. On the empirical side I was fascinated by the psychological details of memory, language and cognition. Computer Science provided me with a space for modeling and testing ideas introduced in these other disciplines.

Currently I work fulltime as a Technical Architect at Columbia’s Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) and study Communication and Education part-time at Teachers College. Our work at CCNMTL involves designing environments which attempt to balance the flow of communication, power, and knowledge within the classroom. The practice of my craft has been greatly complemented by the theoretical contextualization that my graduate studies provide. I have a much greater appreciation for the historical precedents and social impact of technological interventions, and this helps direct my inquiries.

Since graduation my life’s trajectory can be traced full-circle back to the foundational issues that I began to explore as an undergraduate. My vantage point in the trenches during the Internet revolution motivated the questions I have returned to school to investigate. During this period I became involved in professionally related Free and Open Source Software projects and began to actively participate and contribute to these communities. My activity in the free culture movement indoctrinated me to a variety of civil liberty issues at the juncture between technology, law, and politics. My consulting work with non‑profit organizations helped me understand how these technologies can help transform their operational efficiency. These experiences strengthened my desire to use New Media to bring meaningful applications into the world and contribute to positive change. They have also expanded my academic interests to include political science, sociology, economics, and architecture.

Alchemy is a rich metaphorical framework which attempts to reconcile spiritual integrity with material wealth, while recognizing the importance of acting and operating in the everyday world. I take pleasure associating my life story with this heritage and continue to find value connecting my personal, professional, and educational worlds.