

PURPOSE THEORY

I put on my European designer shoes that my mom found thrift shopping during my time back home over winter break. I had just returned from Brazil and was eager to spend time with my family. We loved to shop. Especially at the expense of the Plato's Closet gift cards, I won during the annual Christmas celebration at my grandma's house that I wasn't there for. I put on the vintage 1970s fox brown wool coat that my mom found at a thrift store months earlier; which she only bought in preparation for my first winter at Vanderbilt. First week of the spring semester and we received the most snow that I had ever seen. 6 inches of glistening white powder and the University waded for hours, trying to host instruction the next day, what is for me, tomorrow, as I write in a cafeteria that I've never eaten in. My close friend Clarence and I had just conducted 8 interviews that day, earlier today, talking to elite college students of color across the country. All in part to build the networking agency I founded three days ago. My

experience in the 100 Black Men of America adequately prepared me for the job; we are killing it. Maybe that's my next big project. Maybe it's not. I know the things I've learned conducting the first series of interviews have already covered the cost of my time and energy. Along with the \$14.99, I paid to get Zoom premium. I put on my fancy leather shoes, my vintage coat, along with a pair of gloves, and the flat cap I bought from Target on black Friday that looks like the one my grandfather used to wear. I packed my leather backpack that I bought from a former slave market in Brazil, and I headed outside ready to do... well, something. I didn't know what I would work on. I brought my computer in case I wanted to do homework. I brought a couple of books in case I wanted to read. I packed my first book because yesterday my brother gave Kiese Laymon a copy at Rice University's Martin Luther King Jr. celebration of life event. I brought it just in case I wanted to read the things he might read, but I would read the text differently, operating in a posture that puts my mind inside of Kiese's. I brought my iPad in case I read articles and wanted to take notes. Out of all those facilities, I'm writing to you. I didn't choose the location I would write at. I didn't choose what I would write. To be honest, I didn't choose to write at all.

I trucked through the snow in my new shoes, slightly worried that the water would damage them, but that didn't matter to me. I walked to main campus enjoying the

newfound imagery as the place I've grown to know over the past 6 months was covered in snow. I listened to the music that motivates me. I made good progress navigating the slushy puddles cluttering the ground, in good spirits, before, my headphones turned off. I continued across the bridge because it was much colder in the elevated, exposed space above 21st Avenue. I continued a bit before inspecting my headphones, to which I pondered because something was happening that I had never seen before. 5 illuminated white lights, flashing 3 times after pressing the power button. Vexed, I opened my phone to Google what it could mean: "Low battery". My headphones were charged. I was certain. I entered a state of lucidness because it's moments like these that I look around and say to myself, "What is this trying to tell me?". I know how powerful the butterfly effect is. I know the story of how one social media post evinced an alternate reality in my life. Personally, I call this phenomenon the universe, most religious folk would call it their god. After looking around for a minute, I disabled my Bluetooth and turned it back on. My headphones connected and music started playing.

I didn't have it yet.

I walked for about 100 yards taking the various turns needed to reach my favorite study spots. In the middle of a field passing, operating susceptibly, still searching for the purpose of my journey to main campus... my

headphones turned off. This time for much longer. The same flashing lights appeared. I was growing frustrated, mostly because it was 10 degrees outside. I stood in the middle of the snow, fidgeting with my headphones beginning to question if the Amazon seller sold my mom fake Beats. Defeated, I put my headphones in my bag and pulled out my air pods. But before I zipped the bag up, I decided to try one last time. One, two, three, four, five white LEDs lit up consecutively. This meant my headphones were fully charged and connected. I put my air pods away and my headphones on. I played the most thought-provoking instrumental I know. My headphones were doing something. I do not mean glitching. They were sending me a message, but I didn't have it yet. They were signaling me to pay close attention. I asked over and over, "What does this mean?". I thought about why it was trying to delay my travel. Usually, when I am late to school or miss a stop light, I come to think that if I had been 30 seconds earlier, I would have tragically passed away in a car crash. But one that would've only happened if whatever stopped me, didn't stop me. I've adopted a posture that says everything happens for a reason, I just can't help but try to find that reason. I wondered if my headphones stopping my trek was intentional in the context of crossing paths with people. As I approached an intersection in the pathway, a group of people that I otherwise never would have seen approached at the same time. I wondered if these people were important to me, and I didn't know it yet. I wondered

if they would become my new best friends. I debated speaking to them and saying “I am supposed to speak to you. I don’t know why but I know I am supposed to.”

I did not. That wasn’t it.

Very soon after those people were out of sight, I walked up the ramp to one of the buildings that I had studied in a couple of nights prior. I was contemptuous because I usually get a lot of work done in there, which sounded promising. I pressed my cell phone with my electronic student ID up to the scanner. The LED strip flashed green, then immediately red, meaning the building was closed. Under normal circumstances, this would mean I’d go to a building on the way back to my dorm that was open 24 hours. But these were not normal circumstances. This locked door was strictly an indication that my purpose for tonight, January 16th, 2024, was not in there. Exiting the building’s vicinity, I approached an intersection where 99 times out of 100, I would turn right. I continued straight. I continued walking until I reached another set of doors. Once again, I pressed my phone up to the scanner. Two flashes of green illuminated the dark surrounding area which meant the door was unlocked. I entered the building confident that whatever my headphones were doing, my purpose was in here. I walked with excitement because I wondered if my future wife was around the corner. Would I meet the mother of my children who would one day change

the world? My eyes were peeled. I kept my eyes peeled until... my headphones turned off. I fidgeted with them in this space for about a minute before I started to think. I sat down in a booth at the university's most popular dining hall which I never go to, wondering what was next. I began to treat my headphones like a magic 8 ball. I thought to myself, "Will I find a girl here?", they did not work. I asked, "Will I do something important?", 5 lights flashed consecutively. My headphones were connected. I continued walking, becoming aggressive with my questioning and intense with my analysis of seemingly random things. I reached the genuine end of the building, meaning that I could walk no further without exiting a set of doors. I turned around and as I looked to my right, saw a poster that read, "International Lens". This was a message if I'd ever seen one, but I didn't know what it meant. I still don't know what it means. I stood there with my mouth hung open in disbelief as I began to think of potential applications. I had just come back from Brazil. I had just planned a trip to the Dominican Republic. During one of the interviews, my peer from the University of Pennsylvania talked about his aspirations for studying abroad. I've thought much about studying abroad since returning from my two-week stay in South America. I've spent the past week obsessed with social mobility throughout the African Diaspora; as well as the Haitian slave revolt in 1804. I had these outlets for what "International Lens" could mean for me, I just didn't know

which one was right. I waited intently for my headphones to turn off again. They did not. I must've been hot. As I turned around, for a second, I mean a literal second, I caught a glimpse of a university advertisement displayed on a television screen that read:

NOW HIRING

Undergraduate Writing Consultants for 2024-2025

I waited by the TV until the ad resurfaced, to which I promptly took photos. I walked down a set of stairs questioning if this was the reason my headphones turned off. Maybe the delays in my trip were purposeful, designed to steer me in view of the television ad. Amazed, I decided to sit down and write about this experience.

My headphones have not turned off since.

Maybe the story I am writing now is the essay that will change my life. Maybe I will have spent enough time writing so that when I leave, somebody important will cross my path. Maybe the text I am writing will inspire those who read to do something magnificent in their life.

I will exit this building with the intention of speaking to every person I see because I believe there is a paranormal essence within my right now. 10 seconds ago, as the security guards walking past me spoke, I listened

carefully for any clues as to why tonight is the night something profound will happen. Maybe this is a defining moment in my life, and I don't know it yet.

This is a defining moment in my life, I just don't know how yet.

The possibilities persist; the absence of fruition is not an indication of impossibility, just the affirmation of potentially delayed execution. Purpose might not reveal itself tonight. It may not be soon. But to the person reading what I'm writing, my headphones turned off for a reason.

What does that mean to you?