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### **A Life of My Own Design**

Dr. Catherine Sweet

You asked if we women Rhodes Scholars have “lived a life of our own design.” Looking back on 28 years of “life after Rhodes,” I can truly answer your question with a resounding “YES!” I was struck by the phrase, and it has remained with me ever since you started this project, because it laid bare much of the ambivalence I have always felt about the Rhodes Scholarship.

I can still remember how, as one of the first American women to be awarded the Scholarship, I wondered, “why me?” To this day, I don’t know why the panel chose me over other seemingly more accomplished and qualified candidates. I used to shrug my shoulders and tell people that I was the “token normal person” in the intake that year.

My life (so far, anyway) is not recognizably “successful” or compatible with the popular image of a Rhodes Scholar. I have not run for political office, set up a multi-million pound business, invented some new product that has changed the lives of millions, or won a Nobel prize for Peace, Medicine, or Literature. In fact, I found many of the questions in the Project’s original research survey to be perpetuating the “Rhodes myth” — i.e., that those who are awarded the Scholarship go on to become successful, wealthy, powerful, influential leaders in their chosen fields. That is what Cecil Rhodes intended certainly, but his definition of success was based on masculine ambitions born of an imperial age. It is interesting how easily America embraced his vision, and continues to perpetuate it today. Perhaps it is time to recognize that there are other criteria of success. Perhaps that is what women will bring to the Rhodes Scholarship process — a saner vision of what success means in today’s world.

Maybe I was the token normal person because I started on a more mundane and practical basis than most Rhodes Scholars. I applied for the Scholarship not because of any particular ambition for recognition, fame, or status. I did it because I needed funding to go on to graduate school. I used the Scholarship to fund my masters and doctorate degrees. I was fortunate along the way to use the time in Oxford to escape America’s and the Rhodes definition of success. The Scholarship opened an opportunity for me to define success in my own terms, to escape the

“obvious path.” I didn’t use it as a ticket to a better law school, a high powered job, or a label that I could leverage into influence and status “back home.” Unlike so many other American “Rhodents,” I wasn’t someone who saw their year in Oxford as just a brief sojourn, a waiting room to be enjoyed before returning home to cash in on their new status as one of “America’s elites.”

It is extraordinary that the Rhodes application form does not include a mandatory question, “Why do you want to go to Oxford University, and why is it preferable to any American university?” Getting the Scholarship is all too often seen as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end.

Unlike Bill Clinton, I “inhaled” while in Oxford — and have built a life in Britain ever since. I used my time in Oxford to explore diverse cultures, different politics, people who defined success differently. I got out of the American “ghetto” at Oxford and made friends with people from all over the world, learning in the process to appreciate challenging, thought-provoking conversation, as well as fine art, literature, music, wine, and food along the way. It taught me that America is not the center of the universe, nor does it have any right to claim moral, ethical, religious, or political supremacy. My time in Oxford allowed me to define for myself the possibility of a healthier, more open way of life, away from American definitions of success.

As a result, I have now lived more of my life overseas than in America. I am not “anti-American;” I keep my U.S. passport, and try to keep alive the good aspects of being American, such as an optimism that I can make a difference, that “can do” mentality. But, I have also tried studiously to shed the parochial, ethnocentric prejudices that come built into the American culture: a belief, for example, that if people don’t like Americans, it is “because they are enemies of freedom and democracy” — or indeed, the idea that democracy is the best form of government. Or that Christianity is a better form of religion than any other, that free trade is the only successful way to develop the world economy, that America is now the world’s only superpower, or that economic development must follow “Western models” to be successful. Few challenge the almost casual assumption that the rest of the world aspires to the “American Dream,” and that only fanatics and madmen could want to challenge that dream. In so many ways, that dream is very similar to the one espoused by Cecil Rhodes. It might be argued that the Rhodes Trust was established to find and promote those who would perpetuate that dream, and that the American Rhodes Scholars are the best example of his ideal. If so, then I must rate

as one of the “failures” — I escaped!

When two young college students working on the Rhodes Project interviewed me, they asked me for my definition of success. I gave a one word answer: “happiness.” In my case, that means defining what I judge to be successful, and then achieving it, without imposing it on others. On one occasion, it might mean coaching a deeply distressed employee to have belief in herself, to grow and develop into a successful manager in her own right. On other occasions, it has meant building a successful, loving marriage that has lasted 25 years, unique in two generations of my family. On a more mundane level, it might mean mastering a particular dance step (despite being born with two left feet), or learning a new way to propagate cuttings from my garden flowers. Perhaps one of the questions that should be asked of the more successful (on the face of it) Rhodes Scholars is, “Are you happy?”

I can define happiness in whatever combination of private, personal, and community activity that I want — instead of living up to someone else’s definition of what a good life is, and I work hard not to impose my definition on others.

The second research survey asked whether I was optimistic about my own future. Again, perhaps because I can define my own happiness and have worked toward it, I can answer with a resounding “Yes!” I am currently living a life of my own design — even when that means saying “no” to things that others have defined as success. On at least two occasions I have walked away from a job offer, despite the higher salary, greater status, and recognition it would have afforded — because I realized that getting the offer would be the best part of the job. Again — the Rhodes experience taught me to look beyond the label, read the ingredients to find out if you really buy the dream. Not perhaps what Cecil Rhodes intended, but then I have used my time at Oxford and after to define for myself what I actually value.

As a result, I have built a life that I value. I was lucky enough to steer a somewhat random career course that combined public policy, communications, marketing, and line management in some of the most interesting sectors of the U.K. economy, including financial services. Along the way, I indulged my passion for writing and for solving problems. I had my successes — legislative battles won, PR campaigns fought, business processes improved, organizations rendered more fit for purpose, and people helped along the way to become better workers, better team players, better communicators, and happier individuals in their working lives. I have not changed the face of business, commerce, or politics, but I can point to many things (and a reasonable number of people) that I am proud of in my career. Would Cecil Rhodes

have been convinced? I doubt it!

On the home front, I live in a seventeenth century thatched cottage in a rural village in northwest Hampshire, surrounded by some of the most beautiful countryside in Britain. My husband shares a life of equality with me. Many have tried to define what “gender equality” might look like, but we have built a model that works for us. We share the domestic chores — he cooks more than I do and does the laundry. I clean the kitchen floor and the oven more than he does. We both garden (definitely a verb in England, not a noun), walk dogs and share many leisure interests. We have taken up ballroom dancing lessons, ride a tandem bike, and ring church bells together. We contribute equally to our joint household income. We both decided against having children early on in our relationship. We are what the English describe as “comfortably well off”, but not wealthy. My income was reduced by two-thirds last January when I decided to stop full-time work, but we both now have the financial freedom to work part-time, from home or with clients we respect. We have never, not once in our entire marriage, argued about money. We are free from financial debt, own our own home, and have made sensible pension arrangements. We are both active in our local community, making a difference to the life of our village.

This is my definition of happiness — but I suspect it would not be considered a good return on the investment that Cecil Rhodes made in my future.

The Rhodes Project’s second survey asked whether we are optimistic about the world’s future — and I have to say, no, I am not. Perhaps because there are too many people out there who are driven by other people’s definitions of success rather than their own happiness. Having completed three university degrees in the international relations of the Middle East (including a thesis on the Lebanese Civil war, and another on the PLO), I am well aware that some people’s definitions of success would be an end to the “American occupation of Iraq” and that others are equally convinced that creating a democratic solution for Iraq and Afghanistan is the most important criterion of success. Suicide bombers define success in terms of how many innocent civilian lives they can take with them on the way to their paradise, so long as it keeps fueling the debate about the corrupt Westernized regimes in the Arab world. Others count success in the number of registered voters in Afghanistan, even if they elect warlords who perpetuate the opium crop that fuels the heroin business. Maybe if the people caught up in these issues could be given the chance and encouragement to define success in their own terms, rather than those given to them by others, the world might be a safer, happier place.

Perhaps Voltaire was right. In the face of those who argued in the eighteenth century that life was always getting better, that improvement in the condition of man was something of a natural law, his hero Candide concluded that we might all be better off if we went home and cultivated our own gardens. It could be the sanest response to the turmoil of a post 9/11 world.