M y mother has a theory on exactly where she went wrong. We can pinpoint the moment precisely: I was eight, and she brought home an oversized, illustrated children’s anthology of Greek myths. I became obsessed. During long car rides, I would retell the ancient stories to keep the peace with my four-year-old sister. We would be buckled into the back seat, our short, skinny legs splayed in every direction, our feet bare, my small voice nervous and excited as I stumbled over Grecian names and tried to remember what came next. I’ll admit sometimes I improvised. If luck blessed our parents, we would soon fall asleep.

Those moments spent describing Theseus fighting the Minotaur, or Athena emerging fully grown from her father’s skull, are some of the earliest that I can remember. By now, they have taken on a mythic nature of their own. They are the creation story my mother turns to when she wants to explain who I am and all the ways I have surprised her. On a weekend, she’ll drive to Cambridge from our home in the Boston suburbs and treat me to lunch, listening patiently as I lose myself in some reverie about the latest project or poem or piece for publication. I don’t entirely know how we got here, she’ll joke, but I’m sure that book has something to do with it.

The two people who would eventually become my parents met as undergraduate physics students in China. My father says she was the smarter student, my mother says he was the harder worker. They both became astronomers. Thirty years later and after seven semesters of procrastinating, I enrolled in a Science of the Physical Universe course called “The Energetic Universe” (SPU 19), taught by Professor Robert Kirshner. I came to refer to it in casual conversation as “astro on training wheels.” It was first time I had ever called home for help on problem sets.

In early May, a seven-professor committee charged with assessing the General Education program, of which SPU 19 is part, presented a highly critical report to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences [see “Tough Grading for Gen Ed,” page 32]. The report describes the Gen Ed program as “failing on a variety of fronts” with respect to its stated goals. As articulated in the 2007 legislation establishing the program, those goals are: “to prepare students for civic engagement; to teach students to understand themselves as products of, and participants in, traditions of art, ideas, and values; to enable students to respond critically and constructively to change; and to develop students’ understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and do.”

Here, I find two potent assumptions. First, that the coursework students engage in shapes us to our very core, and second, that to some degree, in order to become our best selves through this process, we must be pushed to engage with courses that we might not otherwise try. As the program currently stands, that “push” exists in the form of eight categories of required courses: Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding, Culture and Belief, Empirical and Mathematical Reasoning, Ethical Reasoning, Societies of the World, United States in the World, Science of Living Systems, and Science of the Physical Universe.

For me, this first assumption is plainly true. I’m thinking of the time when, after a long and frustrated heart-to-heart, a friend smiled and said, “You know, you have a very academic analysis of your love life.” I do earnestly believe that the values, skills, goals, and perspectives with which I approach the world have been shaped by my four years here. That is, after all, what a Harvard education promises: to transform us.
On the other hand, I am unsettled sometimes by the idea that growth must be pushed upon us. One of the more colorful statements from the May report suggests that the program is a “chimera,” bearing the outward appearance of a Gen Ed program but the reality of a distribution requirement. My own anecdotal evidence supports this—consider, for example, the high number of my fellow senior social-sciences concentrators who enrolled in SPU 19 alongside me, having also waited until their very last semester to tango with the hard sciences. For the scientists, I think the equivalent category is Ethical and Moral Reasoning, which for most conjures up images of Plato and late nights spent writing papers in the dining hall. Too much work, too little reward.

I’d argue that most current undergraduates perceive Gen Ed requirements as a mandatory game of chance. You have to play, you have no choice. You might end up in a worthwhile course you wouldn’t have otherwise taken, but you have an equal or greater likelihood of dedicating one fourth of your semester to a course you’re ambivalent about, or worse, despise. This seems at odds with the idea that our academic life influences us so deeply. Why make a risky bet with such high stakes? Why ask students to take courses they might not engage with, if our engagement with courses matters so much?

I’ll admit that in four years I have taken only two classes in the sciences, both to fulfill Gen Ed requirements. The first taught me about evolutionary plant biology; it changed how I see the natural world and I am grateful for it, too. SPU 19 also taught me about my surrounding Iran’s uranium-enrichment program and the hard sciences. For the scientists, I am fairly sure this was not just parents, but experts, thinkers, individuals with careers full of success and failure, of joy and disappointment. I was learning, for the first time, about the work that made them who they are.

How do we separate ourselves from the work that we do? This, to me, is another exercise in contradiction. The rigors of undergraduate life necessitate separating one’s sense of self-worth from one’s GPA, or any other measure of academic success. What do we do so, as many of us know personally, puts mind and heart at risk. Yet, perhaps with the exception of certain cynics, we also commit to four years here with the belief that our education will change us in important and irrevocable ways. It seems we simultaneously live out two opposing truths: first, that through our education, we have a choice in deciding who we are and who we want to become; and second, that this very same education may alter our lives in ways unexpected and unasked for.

In the course of studying for my final SPU 19 exam, I came across a description of the Pleiades, also known as the Seven Sisters—the most visible open star cluster in the night sky. There are two types of stars that can be differentiated because they are more tightly bound by gravity into a spherical shape, contain fewer heavier elements, and are presumed to have formed closer to the beginnings of galaxies. As objects, both are interesting because they are important to the study of stellar evolution, and thus, the age and history of the universe.

Of course, the name Pleiades originates in ancient Greek mythology. In those stories, the Pleiades were the seven divine sisters who accompanied Artemis, goddess of the hunt. They were the daughters of the titan Atlas, who held the world on his shoulders, and a sea-nymph, Pleione. These are names and titles that have been familiar to me for as long as I can remember. They brought me back home. I’m sure that book has something to do with it, I thought.

I remembered, too, that my beloved book of myths had just as much to do with stars as it had to do with stories. Was it my mother’s choice of bedtime reading that made me a writer instead of an astronomer, or was it some essential self that demanded I write? Did my work and courses and reading shape me, or is it somehow the other way around? I’m not convinced one can be sure. Still, as the Greeks needed their myths, and scientists need their theories, doubt does not erase our need for a story to tell.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Melanie Wang ’15 would like to pay tribute to astronomer Williamina Fleming, who paved the way.

SPORTS

“Foot, Ball, Goal”

On scoring in a low-scoring game

The Harvard women’s soccer team seized its moment on a Saturday afternoon last November. A week earlier, the Crimson had suffered its first conference loss in two years, falling 2-0 to Dartmouth; Harvard now needed a win at home in its regular-season finale against Columbia to guarantee its second consecutive Ivy League title.

Enter Margaret “Midge” Purce ’17. The lone player in league history to be named rookie and player of the year as a freshman, Harvard’s star forward had been characteristically quiet in Hanover. But just under 30 minutes into a scoreless matchup with the Lions, that changed instantly. Em-