LeaderShape is a six day intensive program that helps students in the University Honors Program define their vision – which will be defined shortly – and better understand not only their leadership style and traits, but who they are. I was a member of this program and our experience was during the Winter Break of my freshman year (December 14 – 20) and it was held at Camp Higher Grounds. Sixty students bonded together over the experience and acted in a symbiotic relationship, mutually helping one another through support and challenging/probing one’s beliefs in a healthy manner. Up until this point I have described what LeaderShape is, now I will define what it meant to me. LeaderShape was a time to disconnect from the world and discover that which I was passionate for and that which I desired to do. It helped me understand that I have an interest in becoming a professor and it pushed me to form realistic steps that I must take in order to breathe life into the outline of my goals. It was a chance for me to connect with others through truly understanding what they want out of life and what change they wish to create in this world. Summarized, LeaderShape spawned friendships, sparked/redefined ideas and passion, facilitated self-discovery, and motivated students to seek the right future (one where they followed what they loved). Hopefully, my future holds the opportunity for me to help others along this difficult yet powerful journey.

My vision was developed through mental struggle and self-analysis. I was challenged to define and characterize exactly what I wanted to do in terms of my interests. This section was particularly difficult for me because I am, by nature, indecisive and I rarely push myself to understand what I love. After a long period of confusion and frustration, I finally compiled that which gave me joy. My vision, which is a broad idea of what one wishes to accomplish and change, was to either become a professor or become a public representative for a charity. I wish to become a professor one day because I enjoy presenting and because I wish to help students understand who they are; their beliefs and convictions but then to push them further to contemplate and form opinions on deeper ideas and challenge their views. I want to teach in a class where I can present ideas to students that have the potential to redefine their worldview and see beauty in thought – matters of faith, philosophy, lifestyles, the true meaning of our actions, destructive habits, love, etc. I want to be more of a guide than a teacher, encouraging and challenging students along their path to discovery and fulfillment. I want to help students become inspired. Second, I desire to become a public representative of a charity because I believe that I can employ my presenting and communications skills to persuade and impassion others to actions against injustice. I have a strong connection to the marginalized because they often are overlooked and powerless and I feel that I have the responsibility to correct this wrong. I want to be a representative because I wish to motivate people to want pain to end and feel with the marginalized. I want to spark change through speech.

I feel that my purpose is connected to my sense of responsibility and helping others, ending what I know to be wrong, and showing men what is right. This belief was also enhanced by the focus of the retreat – “Lead with Integrity” – as it forced me to evaluate my own sense of justice and right and wrong and how I should be acting. During the course of the week, I looked inward to understand that I must take actions I see as right if I am ever to solidify and create my character/persona. I must stand firm in my beliefs and convictions or else I am nothing; a weak, lifeless, and a corrupted man. My most recent resolutions following LeaderShape are to forgive, to treat all people with respect, to be inclusive with my speech, to follow my faith and explore its depths, to not be angered by inconsequential matters, to never stop the spread of love, and to be confident and courageous. Staying true to these aims, along with my morals, will be exactly how I “Live with Integrity.” I must do what is right and what I should do in order to live the great life.

One of the most important part of an experience and reflection upon an experience is understanding what was learned. A new friend taught me to be generous and to give of yourself as often as one can. Another taught me to view mistakes as an opportunity for growth and self-understanding. I taught myself how to speak without any mental hindrance or obsessive regard for the critiques or disagreement of others. I discovered that I must be eternally strong because I am naturally inclined towards complacency and settling with mediocrity. I learned that I must be confident when I speak and not allow the minds of others to affect my thoughts. I relearned friendship. I reignited my desire to become wise through study of my faith and philosophy. I remembered my want to help others through eliminating the unfair circumstances they are faced with and by motivating others to become more than they currently are. I tried to find the love that I had lost but it eluded me but I realized that I could not love with the hate held in my heart. I realized that I was not content with the man that I am and that I demanded better of myself. I came to understand that I must never stop pushing myself towards greatness but to motivate myself in a healthy way. In summation, this retreat was meaningful to me because I discovered who I should be and because I found a group of friends who can support me through the difficulty of changing paradigms and lifestyles.

The most challenging part of any self-discovery is the resolution. The climax occurs at the point of understanding and mental struggle ensures that arrival at the climax is difficult but the resolution is infinitely more demanding and maddening because it is the man who must continually challenge himself to live out his resolution. The task of enacting one’s enhanced principles, values, etc. is rigorous because one must fight his or her own habits and tendencies but then also remember the spirit and passion that he made the resolution with each day so that he or she does not fall. Men, by nature, are rarely relentless in any aspect of their lives. We are weak and flawed, but there is always hope for reviving one’s soul and determination even after we falter or lose our way because of our conscience and discontentment. There is always hope. I plan to pray the rosary twice a week so that I may remember what I desire – love, wisdom, peace, and justice – and changing my major so that I may study that which inspires me and finally to never settle for less than that which I know I should be. My God made me for a purpose and I believe that I must become the greatest I can be if I am to fulfill this purpose.

Another aspect of the retreat that I enjoyed was contemplation over the meaning of leadership. While there, we were given an extensive definition of the entirety of leadership according to the institute, but I believe that the real definition is much simpler than the idea proposed. I was once told that leadership is positively influencing others. First, I feel that this definition is correct because my desire in life is to help and assist others in a beneficial manner, which aligns with my interpretation. Second, I know it to be true. The definition of such an impactful action should cover all it represents and this definition does exactly that. It describes how one should act as a leader and that one should always have the best intentions of the followers in mind and be morally upright if ever he is to positively affect others. The definition describes the purpose of leadership: others-oriented and caring about the betterment of the individuals as the main goal. It warns a leader that he or she should not be seeking power because leadership roles are designed to use the power for sustainable improvements for the people. It does not specify that we need a title to perform leader-like or heroic acts, but that in any situation, as long as we act with the well-being and minds of others in mind, we are indeed being leaders. Finally, it promotes love. The most effective way to positively influence another is to love them and then to act out of that love. These acts are selfless and with pure intentions in mind. Granted, other people may want their definition to be goal, change, or team oriented, but the definition encompasses those ideals as well. We must care about the people we impact before anything else.

Where to go from here? I recently met up with a member of my LeaderShape small group and he expressed an interest in studying philosophy and talked about college as less of an institution designed to prepare one for a job and more centered in the idea of learning and becoming smarter through gaining knowledge and becoming able to think. His ideas aligned with mine but he shed some light on a concept that had not materialized in my mind: to focus my academic and collegiate efforts on learning that which inspires me and that which moves me to fulfill my passions and live the life I desire. And thus my direction henceforth is to follow that which interests me and to not be obsessed by acquiring a job but to be moving towards the man and life I wish to have. Nearly a month ago, my father said, “At the end,” he wished to die peacefully, and his words startled me that he was already contemplating death. And it struck me so much that I thought about how I would die and what thoughts would go through my mind. I realized that, at my end, I did not want to be full of sorrow over the fact that I had given up easily in my life and pursued a lifestyle of pleasure, sin, and longing for love; an empty and poisoned life. And so I came to realize that the only way to achieve this life is through doing what I know is right and always staying true to my standards and values. I realized that

I must stop my evil habits now if I am to ever be free and love the way I long to. I must take immediate action and never regress. I must follow in the light of Christ as I trust that he will guide me to peace. To those who are reading this, if you are to glean anything from what I write, know this: the only way to be happy is to do what is right and follow what you love. Do not settle for less than you know you can and should be. Do not give in to unrighteousness. I ask this of you because I love you and because I would wish that no man were to ever endure the crushing weight of inner defeat.

“Man can be defeated but not destroyed.”