I am comfortable living in books and ideas. This class has confirmed that in me. I can believe in Siddhartha’s nirvana. I can write a purpose statement. I can be grateful. I can recognize my inner critic. I can believe in a “a higher order, a louder heartbeat” (blog 2/18) and feel called to tune my own heart to it. These things, though, all exist within the pages of a book or within the confines of my head. This class has absolutely stretched me mentally and emotionally, but all of the thinking and theorizing and challenging have acted as cushions. Like the cushions in stories that cushion us from the sharp edges of the story, as I said in my Analytical Paper, all of this self-introspection has been keeping me from the next stage: action.

I have spent an enormous amount of time learning and thinking, but little time taking serious measure to implement change in my life. I have been hesitant to act. By “action” I mean giving life to words, not letting them be empty. I want to take what I have learned and what I believe and see it in my life: I want to treat people better. I want to believe that I am worthy of other people’s love. I want to have to confidence to express myself with conviction. But these are merely desires, the words are flat. I can believe them to be true, but have yet to understand how to act on them.

On 3/27 I blogged about the real and the unreal, saying that “maybe the bottom line isn’t just the real, but somewhere in the middle of both. Because whether something you dream is real or not, it’s still real to you, right?” Looking back on this semester, I can see that I lean on this sentiment to justify my reluctance to act. I can sit around thinking all day, believing certain things to be true, and that can be my reality. Right? At this point, I’m tired of constructing
alternate mental realities. I am ready for my heart to change-- to let what I believe become a part of me-- and to see that acceptance result in changes in my lifestyle. For example, the significance of my spiritual journey was “effecting change through human interconnectedness” (blog 1/21), which I believe can be accomplished by small acts of good towards other. But, ultimately, I still feel like a coward, because I have yet to volunteer at the Haven or take a heartbroken friend out to lunch or to spend more time with my mom. I have such a difficulty starting down that path, I become overwhelmed with everything I want to do and instead do nothing.

Early on in the semester, I blogged that “I’ve never really thought of my journey in more of a spiritual sense and less of a religious sense” (blog 1/21). Spiritual journeys were much simpler to me because I thought about them in a mostly Christian sense, and that is a language that I speak. Through engaging with non-Christians in this class, I have expanded my ideas of what I thought a spiritual journey was through my interaction with people whose journeys were strictly spiritual. In expanding my ideas of spiritual journeys, though, I have felt more challenged to come up with “spiritual” answers to questions. As a Christian, I have become bogged down with standard answers to questions-- “because God loves me,” “because Jesus died for our sins,” “because God is love”-- and I have felt, as Rachel did in writing her Purpose Statement, more challenged to find answers to those questions outside of a religious context. I want to find my own answers. I was struck by how little I blogged about being Christian compared to how much I expected to do so. I spent more time struggling for personal or universal truth outside of Christianity that I did explaining something’s Christian significance or reconciling things with my faith. In this move away from religious answers and toward spiritual exploration, I have recognized my acceptance of easy religious answers as a contributing factor to my lack of action. I would tell myself that loving God was enough, but I no longer feel that way. I stand by the idea
that “the biggest and scariest problems in the world are utterly and entirely fixable. We have the resources, we have the skills” (blog 2/4) and that means taking up the sword, going out into the world.

All this being said, I refuse to let my dissatisfaction with my inaction continue. The stories we have read are full of heros who act, young characters who stand by their beliefs and feel convicted enough to bravely live them out. I feel so strongly about my identity, like Julie, that I do not allow others’ opinions sway me. I want to love so wildly, like Meg, that I would risk everything. Through the major themes we discussed and the narratives we read, this class has been a pressure cooker-- I feel so full of inspiration that I feel I could very nearly spill over into the change I hope to be. I am hopeful that the shifts in my patterns of thought from this class will translate into shifting patterns of behavior.

The acts of reading and writing in this class, which at times were uncomfortable for me, were equally important to the thinking that I did. Oftentimes I did not want to write my blog posts or did not want to have to read about young characters facing struggles, but I did, and pushing myself to do those things was a first step towards action. Making writing a part of my daily life was the most visible change I saw myself undergo in this class; I think I did make significant strides towards “just getting over myself!” (blog 2/22) and writing because I love to. Having read through my blog from start to finish, I can see, as John said in class, an improvement in my ability to articulate myself on the topic of spiritual journeys and elsewhere. This, to me, is a tangible example of how challenging my thinking (about spiritual journeys) lead to actual, visible changes in my life (being more comfortable and more precise in talking about my own journey and others’). This visible change inspired me and gives me hope about the many other changes I wish to see come to pass.
My ideas about reading young adult literature are different now as well. Rereading my application to the class, I am ashamed that I made a distinction between “real” books and young adult ones.

“I think I would still choose a young adult book over an adult one. I love stories and adventure– I think that’s what it comes down to– and also books that take me out of this world, not that make me question it.” (Application, 1/2)

How very wrong I was! In the course readings for this class, I have questioned more things about the world than I ever did reading “adult books.” In fact, being transported to another world leads directly to the questioning of your own world. I can remember reading many of these books as a child, staying up through the night engrossed in the story. But now, I have felt a necessity to close the book sometimes. Those things-- the dark things-- which to me were once just part of the story now resonate much closer because I can feel their presence in my own life. Watching Precious, I blogged that “there is something about looking those things in the face– not being able to close the book– that is so much more horrifying” (blog 3/4). I was horrified because I knew that Precious was real-- those dark things were in my world, not just the one created in the story. Before this class, I did not believe in the fluidity that the fantasy worlds of YA fiction had with the real world-- stories lived in a closed book. I now realize that the reason I so loved those books as a child was not for the story, but for the way that they, perhaps unbeknownst to me at the time, changed the way I saw the world. The darkness of those other worlds was the darkness of my own as well. And that can be terrifying. There is more out there, especially in Young Adult Fiction, and those truths can be applied to our own lives. As the
Archbishop of Canterbury said, “We’re looking for a sense that our present definitions of what it is to be human – what it is to live in the world – are not necessarily the last word or the exhaustive version of reality” (blog 2/27).

I was surprised at how little the darkness in the books effected me when I was young-- I think it made the darkness all the more poignant in rereading them now. As such, the theme of darkness was one that constantly came up throughout my writing and others’ writing in this class. And that theme is one universal to human existence-- how can we explain and justify horrible and hurtful events? How can we find meaning in them? This was the primary focus of my Analytical Paper and, having argued that I have difficulty coming to terms with the darkness in my life, I challenged myself “to bring that darkness into the light, to face those events that have plagued me all these years” (Analytical Paper). I am not sure how far I have come in actually doing that, but I have been encouraged by reading others’ similar struggles.

Emily entreats us to “know yourself, know your deepest, darkest flaws, and can extract your own pain, admit to yourself that you have been bruised by the world – you have a better chance at understanding it” (Emily T., 2/5). This extraction process is one in which I have only taken the first step--recognition-- but that is the hardest part in starting down that path. My first actions have been small-- I have been purposefully thinking and journalling about painful experiences in my past, even though it is difficult to do so-- but I have felt freer because of it. I hope to get to the point that Siddhartha reached: “He felt he has been given the wound not so he could wallow in the pain of it but so it could become a flower, a shining blossom” (98). In this way, actively pursuing it, the darkness of my past becomes a gift I can share with others, “transformed from hurt and pain in beauty and life” (blog 3/31).
So how do I begin to act, being endowed with the wisdom and encouragement from this semester? That is something Dorothe asked me in her comments on my Analytical Essay: “what does this look like?” How do I begin to take care of myself? I’ve got a good start thus far: I know where I want to go, what I want to believe in my heart and how I want to act on it. That, though, has been the crux of the issue for me-- this divide between where I am now and my destination.

Siddhartha spoke to me on this issue, saying that:

“When someone seeks,” said Siddhartha “it can easily happen that his eyes only see the thing he is seeking and that he is incapable of finding anything, incapable of taking anything in, because he is aways only thinking about what he is seeking, because he has an object, a goal, because he is possessed by this goal... perhaps there is much you fail to see that is right before your eyes.”

Taking this advice, I envision small steps, things that are only slightly uncomfortable. I will let the goals fall to the back of my mind and rather push myself little by little, as in the morning pages and the creative writing process, until the actions, which are rooted in these acquired ideas, become habitual. Sustainable, even. Because I am not looking for momentary actions, but deep changes, things that become a part of who I am. I want the things I learned in this class to have a lasting legacy on my journey-- and not just in what I think, but who I am and who I see myself to be. By living these ideas-- by “experiencing directly for oneself what one has to understand” (Siddhartha 77)-- I hope that what I think and I believe to translated into who I am.