

Biographical questions

Answers by [Brian Tomasik](#), spring 2005

When I was a senior in high school, one of my best friends was assigned a biography project for his English class. He decided to write about me. For the project, he asked me a series of questions. This document contains my answers at the time, with a few small redactions.

Some of my views have changed since 2005, including about [environmentalism](#). You can read more about my current perspectives on my website: "[Essays on Reducing Suffering](#)".

--Brian, 4 Aug. 2014

When were you born?

I was born on 15 March 1987 in St. Peter's Hospital in Albany, NY, USA.

Where have you lived? What locations have influenced your life?

The locations that have meant the most to me have been 70 Ketcham Road and 218 Old Stage Road. Both are somewhat secluded in the country and consequently provided beautiful, serene environments. They contributed to my appreciation of nature.

What religion do you practice?

For the first few years of my life—before I was old enough to know better—I believed in Christianity, and I went to the Altamont Reformed Church with my parents. But that began to change when I became interested in dinosaurs. [...]

I now have no religion and do not wish to, for, to me, religion implies faith without thought and belief without reason. I am guided instead by science—not necessarily the specific theories that scientists have developed (as those could be wrong) but by the scientific process, which recognizes that no knowledge is certain while at the same time making use of empiricism to found conceptions of the world. All opinions and beliefs should originate from demonstrable evidence. This is what makes science unique in contrast to all other forms of belief: it is not absolute, it is founded on rationality, and disputes can be resolved by further study (rather than by futile arguments over one's personal beliefs).

I do not deny that religion might be true; with the limited nature of human knowledge, anything is possible. But because there are infinite possible forms of the universe, and Christianity presents only one, I consider the probability that Christian doctrine is true to be one over infinity.

How were you raised?

I was raised by very loving parents who spent a great deal of time interacting with me. When I was young, my mother and father read every night to my sister and me. We picked out entire stacks of books for them, which would sometimes take over an hour to finish.

I was also raised watching only public television (*Mister Rodgers' Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street*, *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, and *Wishbone*, for example) until I was in fourth grade. I think that the limited amount of television that I watched, and the substantive content of what shows I did see, was important in making me a smart and hardworking student.

Perhaps the most important part of the way that my parents raised me was their lack of rules. There were times when they forced me to do certain things, but for the most part, I was able to do what I wanted. This allowed me to learn decision making and self-discipline on my own. When parents try to impose requirements on their children, the children often rebel against them; when parents let their children make choices independently, the children become more mature and capable. That, at least, has been my experience.

Have you ever held a job?

I have never held a paying job, but I have been involved with many community-service activities:

- ❖ Habitat for Humanity
- ❖ Tutoring in the ESL advisory
- ❖ Food Bank
- ❖ Soup Kitchen
- ❖ Guilderland Public Library
 - Book reshelving and display preparation
- ❖ Albany Pine Bush
 - Aspen girdling and lupine-seed collection
- ❖ Guilderland Study Circles
 - Took notes on a community discussion about ways to improve Guilderland drinking-water quality

Have you ever participated in any sports?

I have never formally played on a sports team. However, I frequently play tennis with my father and sister during the summer. I also have a ping-pong table and darts board in my basement.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I enjoy solving math puzzles and deriving formulas on my personal blackboard (and at Math Club), as well as studying the patterns of grammar. I occasionally play

chess with my father (and at Chess Club). Especially when I was younger, I made movies with my video camera; these ranged from puppet shows to live action to stop-motion animation with clay figures. I enjoy baking. The only television shows that I watch are *NOW with Bill Moyers* and *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*, both on PBS. I often write advocacy letters to members of Congress and other decision makers, and I occasionally go to protests (including the 15 February 2003 peace protest in New York City). I mostly read nonfiction, particularly books and articles about politics.

Doing homework, also, is one of my favorite hobbies.

How do you hope to influence others?

I hope to show people the value of understanding rather than memorizing, of learning for the sake of learning, of enjoying and marveling at life, of working hard for what is most important, and of striving to make life better for posterity.

How are you unique?

The way that I think about decisions is one way in which I think I am somewhat unique. I often approach important choices from a rational mathematical perspective (not unlike economics).

What are your pet peeves?

I try not to have pet peeves. I try to avoid feeling annoyance at trivial matters.

However, I am not always successful. I am probably most annoyed when I am interrupted in the middle of doing something—reading, doing homework, writing, and sleeping. It can also be annoying, for example, when my family's cat Herky disturbs me to ask to go outside but then decides to stay inside once I open the door.

What moods have characterized your life?

I have always been generally happy and found life fun; my parents probably deserve the most credit for that. But I remember that when I was younger, I used to get upset, frustrated, and angry more easily; sometimes I even threw things on the floor or fought with my sister. However, as I grew older and was influenced by positive role models, I found this happening less and less; at the same time, I gained a deeper realization of how amazing and precious life is. I now consider myself to be very equanimous, rational, and calm but also joyful, optimistic, and positive. I rarely get angry or distraught, and when I do, I find a healthy way to deal with the emotion.

What are your plans for the future?

The best answer to this is that I am not yet sure.

I have applied regular decision to four colleges/universities: Swarthmore, Bates, Bowdoin, and Princeton. I have not yet made up my mind, but I am strongly leaning toward Swarthmore.

I have also applied for a Congress-Bundestag scholarship, which would pay all of the costs for living for a year in Germany. I don't consider it likely that I will win this, but if I do, I'll defer admission my college for a year. I'll find out about the scholarship on 8 March.

At college, I plan to take courses in lost of different subject areas (math, chemistry, physics, political science, history, economics, linguistics, philosophy). I'm not sure what my major will be, but the natural sciences or social sciences are most likely.

I intend to continue on to graduate school, though I don't know what kind. One possibility is to study law and become a lawyer with an environmental organization. I don't know what my career will be, but I do know that it will deal with environmental and economic problems.

Date: Mon, 7 Mar 2005 16:14:34 -0800 (PST)
From: Brian Tomasik
Subject: Grandparent Information

Below is information on my father's parents.

My paternal grandmother (1920 -) is Stephanie Tomasik (her maiden name was Koscinski). My paternal grandfather, Henry Joseph Tomasik (1914 – 1971), was a factory worker in Utica, NY (where he and his wife were born). Their parents were all immigrants from what is now Poland who came to work in the factories in Utica. Henry and Stephanie had six children, of whom my father was the youngest.

[...]

In addition, I should update you on the effort to encourage the school district to buy recycled paper. In mid-February I sent a letter to the Board of Education requesting that they select the recycled-paper bid offer when they approved the next paper purchase. On 15 February, I attended the Board meeting at which they would decide on the paper bid; the Board decided not to spend a little over \$1,000 more on the recycled paper because of the pressure to restrict the budget as much as possible. The "Altamont Enterprise" wrote an editorial about my endeavor; I have several copies of it, and I can give you one if you want.

-Brian

Date: Tue, 8 Mar 2005 17:34:41 -0800 (PST)
From: Brian Tomasik
Subject: More Grandparent Information

Maternal grandparents

Brian's Grandmother – Margaret DeVries was born in Ames, Iowa, to Louis DeVries and Anna Brahms, both of whom emigrated from Germany. Louis DeVries was the head of the language department at Iowa State University. He was a professor of languages and also wrote textbooks and a German-English Technical Dictionary which is still in print today. Margaret DeVries got her degree in nutrition from Iowa State and worked as a dietician. Later she got her Master's Degree in teaching and taught elementary school for 20 years. She died in 2002.

Brian's Grandfather – Donald Ketcham was born in the house he grew up in on Ketcham Road. The farm was bought by his grandfather, Ambrose Spencer Ketcham, in 1872. Donald's father was Egbert Newton Ketcham, and his mother was Ellena Schemerhorn. Donald was a dairy farmer and then a mailman. His ancestry was 3/4 Dutch and 1/4 English.

I lived in the farmhouse on Ketcham Road for a few years, so I was closer to my maternal grandparents than my paternal ones. [...]

My grandmother played board games (especially Monopoly) for hours on end, watched movies (such as The Great Muppet Caper), and read stories (particularly an old set of fairy-tale books). She even played a computer game called "Math Rescue" when my sister and I asked her to. I very much appreciated the time that she was willing to spend being with me and my sister.

Date: Fri, 11 Mar 2005 18:10:45 -0800 (PST)
From: Brian Tomasik
Subject: Events/Influences

Probably the best events/influences are those I've described elsewhere (for example, seeing Ralph Nader, having Mr. Lasselle for Earth Science, watching Mister Rodgers), but I'll mention a few others whose effects have not been quite as obvious.

Growing up on a farm in the country gave me an appreciation for the wonder of nature and its capacity for rejuvenation (a sentiment well expressed in a quotation that I found just recently: "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts." – Rachel Carson).

Being able to wander practically anywhere I wanted on the farm property, I learned independence and exploration. Spending time in the serenity of the outdoors instead of watching fast-paced television may have contributed to my patience and ability to concentrate for long periods of time.

My work ethic arose partially from inspiration by Nader and other public figures but also from my family. When working on the farm, my mother and father woke up early to do the chores—such as feeding the cows and collecting eggs from the chickens—even on the coldest winter days. They also determined to design and build the new house on Old Stage Road primarily by themselves, even though doing so required them to learn about architecture, electrical wiring, plumbing, etc.

The following email was sent on Friday, 18 March 2005.

Accomplishments

Some of my most important accomplishments I've written about elsewhere, such as asking the school district to purchase recycled paper. Many of the additional accomplishments that I'll list below are probably not as significant.

From my earliest childhood to when I was in second or third grade, I took an active interest in dinosaurs. I owned a dozen or two books on the subject, and the dinosaur section was usually the first one I visited at the library. Eventually I could give the name and period of existence for probably twenty or thirty different species, as well as copious additional information. When I was in second grade, I wrote by hand a paper of about fifteen pages describing various attributes of different types of dinosaurs, all from memory.

As you know, I memorized pi to 231 digits (including the 3.14 part). I began in sixth grade and slowly learned groups of five numbers up through about eighth grade. Thereafter, I continued to memorize a few more here and there.

Since the middle of elementary school, I have made home movies with the family video camera. Many of these employed stop-motion animation (sometimes with clay and sometimes with small toys). I sometimes spent hours creating figures, writing a script, drawing backdrops, and recording small movies—which ended up being about two minutes long. I also recorded Herky, birds in the sky, frogs in the pond, and interesting domino set-ups. Soon I began to make puppet-based movies in the style of Jim Henson. My family and I made probably a dozen episodes of “The Adventures of Kermit and Fozzie,” and I shot also a few episodes of “The Puppet Show” (intended to imitate “The Muppet Show”). When I was in seventh and eighth grade, I made a series of movies with my father entitled “If You Ever Thought You Had a Bad Morning”; they were silent

movies (without dialogue but with music) that were in some ways modeled on Jackie Chan's action scenes. In the first episode, my father met his evil twin and ran away from himself (he and the twin obviously never appeared together in the same shot), and in later episodes, I ran from and fought him. In addition, I wrote several movie scripts, one of which was actually made into a forty-minute film, "Ragtime: A Fishy Tale" in which my father played all of the characters. And as you know, when I was in seventh grade, I did the cinematography and editing for my sister's "Alice in Taoland" video as a school project. At the same time that I was making these movies, I read two books on the topic of how to shoot high-quality amateur films.

When I was in eighth grade and had Mr. Lasselle for Earth Science, I began making "quizzes" for him that consisted of problems that I had contrived. For example, one question read approximately as follows: "In the Tomasik temperature system, absolute zero lies at 0°T and the boiling point of water lies at 1000°T . At what temperature in degrees Tomasik does water freeze?" From that year on I devised and attempted to solve difficult math puzzles.

I am also proud of many of the research papers that I have written. As my independent-writing piece for the last quarter of Mr. Kavanaugh's English class, I wrote a 23-page report on biotechnology in general and genetically modified crops in particular. For ninth-grade Global, I wrote a 24-page paper on the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor. On my own during ninth grade and the summer prior to tenth grade, I wrote a 16-page report on the history, uses, and benefits of industrial (non-drug) hemp. For tenth-grade English, I wrote a 19-page research paper on the agricultural subsidies, with specific focus on the 2002 Farm Bill; Mr. Pipa was so impressed with it that he encouraged me to submit a shortened version for publication. I sent my article to the *Times Union*, *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *The Progressive Populist*, TomPaine.com, and other publications, but none accepted it. And, as you know, for AP US History, I wrote a 28-page report on Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette's third-party candidacy for president in 1924.

When I was in eighth grade, I began writing advocacy letters to members of Congress, state legislators, businesses, and executive agencies, usually based on "action alerts" that I received from environmental groups. Since then, I have written letters on around sixty or seventy different issues (not counting form emails sent from organizations' websites, which are much less effective than original letters). My parents have written their share of these letters, as well.

I submitted my summer-2004 research on the Watervliet Reservoir to the Intel Science Talent Search (a nationwide science contest for high-school seniors in which about 1600 students participate). I decided to enter partially because a friend (the former co-president of SEAC who is now a freshman at MIT) submitted an astronomy project last year and became one of the top twenty Finalists. As I expected, I did not even become one of the 300 Semifinalists in the competition, but the process of compiling my research

report was rewarding nevertheless. (If you would like, I can send you the twenty-page report and/or the five short essays that I had to write about my scientific qualities.)

I sent this on Friday, 25 March 2005.

TIMELINE

1913

Donald Ketcham, my maternal grandfather, was born.

1914

June—Henry Joseph Tomasik, my paternal grandfather, was born.

1919

Margaret DeVries, my maternal grandmother, was born.

1920

23 February—Stephanie Koscinski, my paternal grandmother, was born.

1952

23 July—Betty Ketcham was born.

1955

12 May—Stephen Tomasik was born.

1971

November—My paternal grandfather, Henry Tomasik, died.

1985

26 February—my sister born.

1987

15 March—I was born in St. Peter's Hospital.

1987 – 1993

I lived at 18 Ketcham Road (a small house next to my maternal grandparents' farm)

September 1991 – June 1992

Attended Altamont Cooperative Preschool. (I had Theresa Lasselle, Richard's wife, as my teacher.)

September 1992 – June 1993

Attended kindergarten at Altamont Elementary School.

1993 – 1995

Moved to an apartment just outside of Altamont.

1993

Fall—Stephen first began reading Bruce Coville’s fantasy and science-fiction books to my sister and me. He continued to do this for many years.

1994

Summer?—Visited Howe Caverns.

1995

Summer—My sister found Herky (a cat that people had apparently dropped off).

1995 – 1996

Moved to 70 Ketcham Road (my maternal grandparents’ farm).

1996 – 1997

I lived in an Altamont apartment.

1997 – 2001

I lived at 70 Ketcham Road.

1998

June—With my fifth-grade class at Altamont Elementary, Stephen and I went on a whale watch in Boston and visited the New-England Aquarium in Boston.

September—My maternal grandfather, Donald Ketcham, died.

1998 – 2000

During this time, I made “Ragtime: A Fishy Tale” and “If You Ever Thought You Had A Bad Morning #1,” as well as an animation movie that used pictures that I had drawn on the computer with Paint.

2000

Spring—Went to Plymouth Plantation and the Boston Museum of Science (as did you).

Summer—I filmed an interview of Stephanie Tomasik that Stephen did. He later made a video of the interview that he distributed as a gift.

September 2000 – June 2001

I was in eighth grade and had Richard Lasselle for Earth Science.

2000

November—Saw Ralph Nader for the first time at Skidmore College (though only on a television in a café next to the auditorium, since the auditorium was full).

Summer 2001 – summer 2005

I lived at 218 Old Stage Road.

2001

May or June—Visited the Museum of Natural History with the eighth-grade Earth-Science classes. A week later, I visited New York City again with the another class.

Summer—I saw Granny D speak at the Book House; she signed a copy of her book that I bought.

Fall—Attended the Schumacher Foundation Lecture at Amherst College; Amory Lovins and John Todd spoke.

Fall—Went to Albany Public Library to hear the Green Party discuss its response to 9/11.

Fall—Heard Eric Schlosser at Siena.

Fall—Guy talking about factory farms at a public library.

10 November—Saw Ralph Nader (in person, this time) at a Democracy Rising event at Boston's Orpheum Theater.

November—I saw Amy Goodman speak at RPI.

2002

September—My maternal grandmother, Margaret Ketcham, died.

October—Participated in a peace protest in Albany.

4 November—Heard Winona LaDuke at Siena.

Late—Attended Sustainability Conference at Albany Law School.

2003

17 January—Took part in an Albany peace protest.

15 February—Joined half a million antiwar protesters in New York City on the worldwide day of protest.

March—Heard Howard Zinn at Siena.

April—I took water and sediment samples on the Watervliet Reservoir for my Honors Chemistry project on phosphorus. I measured phosphorus concentrations at the Keck Water Research Lab at RPI.

21 April—Heard Amy Goodman at RPI.

June—My sister graduated from high school.

July—I began college visits: Brandeis, Bates, and Bowdoin.

July—Attended one-week Tennis Camp at Guilderland High School.

August—Second round of sampling on the Watervliet Reservoir.

August—My sister began college at Swarthmore.

Fall—Attended, for a second time, the Schumacher Foundation Lecture at Amherst College.

2004

10 February—I saw Ralph Nader at Hamilton College.

April—I heard a speech by Robert Kennedy Jr. at Union College.

May—I saw *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway with my eleventh-grade English class.

July and August—Finished college visitations: Dartmouth, Amherst, Tufts, Harvard, Brown, Yale, Haverford, and Princeton.

August—I saw Ralph Nader debate Ron Paul at the Northeast Organic Farmers' Association Summer Conference at Hampshire College (just outside of Amherst, Massachusetts).

September and October—Stayed overnight at Haverford, Bates, and Bowdoin Colleges.

November—Submitted final project to Intel Science Talent Search.

December—Finished college applications. I also finished the first part of the application for the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Program and had an in-house interview with a representative of AFS (the organization coordinating the Congress-Bundestag scholarships).

2005

22 January—Selection-committee interview for Congress-Bundestag scholarship.

15 February—Board of Education rejected my proposal to choose the recycled-paper bid.

24 February—I went to see Lester Brown speak at Union College.

9 March—I found out that I did not get one of the Congress-Bundestag scholarships.

March—I attended five meetings of the Guilderland Central School District's Citizens' Budget Advisory Committee.

19 March—Won first place at a Chemistry Olympiad contest at Albany College of Pharmacy. Then went to a peace demonstration in New Paltz on the second anniversary of the Iraq war.

The following email was sent on Monday, 28 March 2005.

Here are a few stories that I came up with:

(1) When I was very young (probably no more than six years old), I was playing with my sister on the swing set that we had in the yard. It had a blue slide, two regular chain-held swings, and one metallic swing in which two people could sit facing each other. My sister was swinging by herself in the two-seated swing, while I was climbing on the upper horizontal bar that held the parts of the swing set together. I decided to hang upside down on the bar over the two-seated swing, but in doing so, I apparently lost my grip and fell off. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the swing across from my sister, presumably having fallen in such a way that I landed in the perfect position at the perfect time to avoid being hurt. It was almost as if I had not fallen at all, for my body didn't even feel the impact of hitting the swing.

(2) Probably around this same time, my family went out to Utica, NY, to visit Brian Zampier, who was my father's friend in high school and after whom I was given my first name. During the stay there, my sister and I both remember seeing a man across the street standing in his paved driveway holding a hose, with which he was "watering" two alligators that were lying on his lawn. I now suspect that my sister and I somehow imagined or misinterpreted what we saw, especially since none of the adults seemed to pay an attention to it, but I still find it strange that both my sister and I can clearly remember this incident as if it really happened.

(3) On 10 February 2004, I went to Hamilton College to hear Ralph Nader speak about the environment. I taped the speech with my video camera. Afterwards, Nader sat at a table to sign books of his that were for sale. I bought *Crashing the Party* and asked him to sign it, but when I told him my name, he mistook it for "Ryan" and wrote that in the front of the book. When my mom told Nader how much of an impact he had had on me, Nader said, "We expect great things from you, Ryan."

Below are selections from a journal that my mom has kept over the years in which she records interesting things that I do and say.

(1) As a child, Brian was very interested in nature, space, rocks, dinosaurs, frogs, and other animals. When he was about six he asked why all the people in the world couldn't live in one place so that the animals would have more room.

(2) He was always in awe of the idea that space never ends and wondered how the universe began and how it will end.

(3) He didn't like going to school in elementary school. "Too boring" was his reason.

(4) When I was two years old, the family was picking tomatoes in the garden. As we walked back to the house, I asked my mom, "Will you ka [carry] me?" She agreed and carried me along with a bucket of tomatoes. I told her, "That's what the bucket says, too."