Lewer Global Scholarship Essay (July 2026)

Ephraim Rolingson

A Father's Son

I open my eyes and do not know where I am or who I am. Unfortunate. It's not all that unusual. I have spent most of my life not knowing. Though, this time it feels quite different. A feeling of dread accompanies it. It is much more frightening.

I look around. My pillow is damp from the beads of sweat on my forehead. My alarm clock read 3:05 a.m.

I remember now.

After a deep sigh, I turn to my other side, and, with a cough, I curl into the fetal position, then flip over onto my stomach. Now I wait, and wait, for my racing mind to allow me to fall back asleep. In the back of mind, I recall Barack Obama's timely quote in his memoir, *The Audacity of Hope.*

'Someone once said that every man is trying to live up to his father's expectations or make up for his father's mistakes.'

'I suppose that may explain my particular malady.'

I'm a young man. Twenty-one. But I wake as if I were forty. This is my fourth semester at the same internship. Upon opening my eyes I'm a stranger to myself, and while, again, this is not new, it is starting to strike me more. I run quickly through the basic facts in my mind. My name is Ephraim Rolingson. Son of Faran Rolingson. I am the oldest of three. I like reading books and going on long walks. I am an Electrical Engineering major. I am a power company engineer, even though I don't want to be a power company engineer. Yes. I don't want to be a power company engineer. I begin my journey out of bed for work as this this last piece of identity begins to slide into place.

I remember arguing with my father on a late Thursday night about the trajectory of my future. Though his voice was not angry, his exasperation continued to rise as the night waned, but his certainty remained. That certainty is a force of nature. To him, the path that I needed to take was obvious.

'Son, stick to the plan. You're going to finish your degree, get a job at a power company, and in a couple of years your life will be set.'

As an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago and growing up in the inner city of Newark, New Jersey, where the city never sleeps, and there is always someone trying to get ahead, my dad worked extremely hard in his youth. He would wake up early, suit up for work, and, intensely as always, put in long hours at work. Six-Tens. Seven-Twelves. Hours passed by and

the world spun, yet he proceeded through that same routine. Day in. Day out. All in order to support my mom through school and his children.

So, as the firstborn son, I carried the crown of my father's expectations on my head. To him, a career in a power company felt like a reward from heaven. He wanted a secure job for his son that would pay well and not break his body through the process. I imagine this career prospect eased his anxiety because I would not suffer like he has suffered. He wished he had that opportunity when he was younger. This was the weight he put in my palm. It would take an iron will to hold it.

Mine was made of paper.

Despite my many attempts to banish this plan from my mind, both psychologically and spiritually, his ideas kept overtaking me, resounding back to attack me whenever I would try to push them down. So, I kept trying to become the person he envisioned. I did the four-semester internship with a top electric utility company. I went the corporate route. I dressed like them. I smiled like them. I laughed like them. I learned to behave and act how I needed to in order to get my dad's approval. Yet, I was excruciatingly unhappy.

It must have seemed from the outside that everything was lining up perfectly for the wonder kid. I knew that they would give me an offer when graduation was on the horizon. However, deep down, I knew that I did not want to go that route. Looking back, I think that it was not the job itself, it was the fact that I was living someone else's dream. Someone else's life. I knew that if I continued, cowardly following step in step with what he wanted, his hope will live, and mine would die. I tell myself this because at the time it seemed like I was the only one who understood what I was saying. I must fight the goad.

I know that I want to start a tech business, despite not knowing exactly what kind of product I want to create. Preferably an engineering company based on my particular skill set. One that solved a problem for many, for many years. I want to be a problem solver. The most obvious next step for me was that I needed to know more. At the time, and still even now, my skill deficit feels so deep and so vast that it's like I am trying to survey deep space. Big dreams feel so tiring.

But what I feel does not matter in the end. It is what I do that makes me brave.

So, the first week of my senior year, I talked to almost every professor in the Electrical and Computer Engineering department and asked them if they had any research opportunities available. If they said no, whether because they had no funding, all the positions were taken, or they simply did not want to hire me, I asked them if they knew any other professors that might have an opening.

I received a lot of no's.

And as time continued on, the pressure from my dad kept building up. He kept asking me if I was reaching out to my previous managers about job opportunities after college.

I kept saying yes.

Luckily, I noticed a flyer from a newer professor I did not know. It was about an undergraduate research position involving movement in robotics. I immediately got his information, sent him my resume and waited for a response.

He gave me a time to come to his office and interview. After speaking with me, he said,

"I don't think you have the skills to help me on this project."

My heart deflated like a ballon. Then he paused.

"However, I do have this position in my battery research lab. I need someone to take up this project I have been working on for a while."

I accepted immediately.

The project focused on creating a hardware-in-the-loop Battery Management System for lithium-ion batteries. The process of creation consisted of much terror, agony, and doubt. I was essentially tasked to climb a mountain of knowledge with my bare hands. And I was right. I did not have the skills. There were many failures. There were very long hours in the lab. I remember the two weeks before we were supposed to present our project for an award, I would punch in the code to the lab door at 7:00 a.m., work until one or two in the morning, and then go on a run afterward in order to stay on top of my fitness goals.

For me, victory was no longer about proving my dad wrong. It was about proving to myself that I could build a life that belonged to me. With every failure, every long night, and every new skill I fought to learn, I loosened the grip his plan had on my future. I loosened the grip it had on my mind. I knew I had to rip off his given definition of success with dogged persistence. No one else could give me permission to choose myself. I had to claim that freedom on my own. In the end, we did end up winning the Paul Salmon Award for best project in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department.

By that point in time, I had received multiple offers to various engineering companies, including the power company that I had spent so much time at. I turned them down. Instead, I chose to pursue my master's degree and become a Graduate Research Assistant at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. My research will focus on efficient electrochemical impedance spectroscopy and modeling of lithium-ion batteries. How lovely it is to pursue your dream while you are awake.

I know my dad was not trying to control me out of cruelty. He wants me to be safe. He wants me to avoid unnecessary struggle. He wants me to have what he believed would protect

me. However, I can see now that I can respect my father's wisdom without sacrificing my aspirations.

I am still my father's son, but I am no longer an extension of his plans. I am not the young man who began this odyssey on that late Thursday night. It's funny. He inadvertently influenced me to find out exactly which direction I wanted to go.

By finding out exactly where I did not.