



*"We are stardust
We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden."*

—Joni Mitchell,
"Woodstock"

New Student Reading: 2014-2015

Wild by Cheryl Strayed

Mapping Our Journeys; Discovering The World

THE CLASS

The New Student Seminar is a required course for all new students enrolled in the Steinhardt School. The seminar is your orientation to the university and our school and will introduce you to the nature of higher education and your program of study. Using the new student reading as your guide, you will begin to actively explore your role as a member of our diverse and global academic community. This year we set out to learn what one woman's journey into the highest reaches of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountain range can teach us about our lives.

THE BOOK

Wild tells the story of Cheryl Strayed's three-month hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. After the death of her mother and the dissolution of her marriage, Strayed, an aspiring writer, took to the open road with an overstuffed backpack, a trail book, and a pair of too-tight hiking boots. Like the wanderer in Joni Mitchell's song, "Woodstock," Strayed is fleeing an oppressive society and looking for the untouched world of nature, a place where she can "camp out on the land" and get her "soul free."

Wild is also about the challenges, terrors, joys, heartache, pleasure, surprises, and tribulations that Strayed faced on her journey. It is through her example that we may discover how to live our own lives.

LITERARY TRADITION

Wild is a memoir that pulls from an American literary tradition that speaks of the artist's journey to self-discovery. The book offers us a lesson about independence (*Self-Reliance*, Ralph Waldo Emerson), anecdotes about the artist's journey (*On the Road*, Jack Kerouac), tales of innocence and experience (*Black Boy*, Richard Wright), as well as a poet's assessment of our place within the universe ("Woodstock," Joni Mitchell).

THE THEME

Mapping Our Journeys; Discovering the World

Though the landscape of Washington Square is vastly different from the Pacific Crest Trail, your new life at NYU puts you on different path from any you have travelled before. College is a time of enormous growth and potential, a time of taking stock, of rising to challenges,

and charging forth on your own volition. It is also a time of feeling alone in the world, of being wild, of testing yourself and being tested. It can be a time of opening yourself up to unknown sensations, fears, and mysteries.

Like Strayed, you may have struggled academically and financially to get here. You may have experienced family strife, the loss of someone close, a major or minor tragedy, or hardship in your daily life. Regardless of your life circumstance, you now have the chance to make a fresh start, to reinvent yourself, discover new things, and learn more about the person you really are.

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

1. In *Wild*, Strayed takes many risks and sometimes puts herself in harms way. She sets out on her journey hoping to heal and to cleanse herself of past mistakes, including her drug use, but she sometimes engages in behavior that could have potentially disastrous results. What is the riskiest thing you have ever done and why? Did your actions lead to enlightenment or disaster?
2. Strayed carried too much in the backpack she called 'Monster.' What do you carry in your metaphorical backpack? Could you lighten your load? Is there something you'd like to carry that you don't yet have?
3. In *Wild*, nature is often described as a vast unforgiving landscape that inflicts, pleasure, harm, and sometimes indifference. While hiking, Strayed uses the elements of nature to her advantage and is also sometimes undone by them. As New Yorkers, we often don't come face to face with nature unless we look for it. How do you treat nature? Are there ways in which you could be more sensitive and mindful toward our fragile ecosystem.
4. The world in *Wild* is one of sound, sight, taste, thought, feeling, and a multitude of other elements that are likely to be studied at the Steinhardt School. How is your field of study represented in *Wild*? Think about what you are learning—art, music, food studies, psychology, media, health, and education—and describe how the author pays homage to your subject area. Look at *Wild* through the eyes of your discipline. What do you learn?

5. In *Wild*, Strayed is on a personal journey of self-discovery and much of her time is spent looking inward, thinking about her life and the road she has been travelling. Consider those people whose journeys were public and dedicated to looking outward, beyond the self, to expand boundaries and create a more just and inclusive society. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (civil rights), Betty Friedan (woman's liberation movement), Harvey Milk (LGBT rights), and many others have set out on a journey to secure dignity and freedom for humanity. As an NYU student, how can you look outside yourself to influence the lives of others? What are you going to do to make a better world?
6. We might say that Strayed, like Joni Mitchell, has written about youthful idealism and a vanishing world. The social movement, "Occupy Wall Street," called for financial justice and economic transparency. How do the choices that you make in your life impact politics and culture? How important is wealth and material possession? How would Strayed's journey been different if she had had more money?
7. Part of the work that Strayed feels she must do on her journey is come to terms with her mother's death. On the road to Crater Lake, Strayed says that her mother "would always be the empty bowl that no one could fill." In some ways, Strayed's separation from her mother was premature, but it was also an inevitable part of the life cycle. How does your separation from your family impact your daily life? How have your parents shaped your journey?
8. Since the beginning of time, pilgrims have travelled to religious shrines as part of a search for spiritual meaning. Many find the journey brings them closer to the divine. In *Wild*, Strayed is a hiker following a trail that she hopes will end in spiritual enlightenment. In what ways is Strayed enlightened at the end of *Wild*? How has her faith been shattered?
9. Throughout *Wild*, Strayed reminds us that she is not an experienced hiker and that she has planned poorly. How do you think Strayed's inner voice, her running monologue of failure, affects her performance on the Pacific Crest Trail?
10. At certain points in her journey, Strayed experiences a generalized anxiety which she connects to the sound of animals or the changing weather or her dwindling food supply. Despite her emotional state, Strayed is able to soothe herself and continue on. What do you think of her strategies? How might these strategies be applied to your life here at NYU?
11. Strayed took to the trail at a time when technology was in its infancy—without a GPS, cellphone, or a way to connect to others through email—at a time when a person could get lost and remain lost. How has technology shaped the risks you take? Can you imagine being out of contact with the world?
12. From time to time in *Wild*, Strayed avails herself of the 'Free Box,' items cast off from one hiker as a gift to another. Using the wisdom gained from your first semester at NYU, what object would you leave for someone following behind you on the trail? What is your gift to those who come after you? What note would you leave on the register to your fellow traveller who will one day start college as a new student?

The Dean's New Student Convocation

In early October, the entering Class of 2014 will gather together with our Dean and one of our distinguished faculty to add a final note to the discussion of our New Student Reading, and our New Student Theme.

Express Steinhardt!

Before arriving on campus, we invite you to interpret our New Student Theme, *Mapping our Journeys; Discovering the World* through a creative means of expression, including but not limited to video, photography, painting, poetry, speech, short story, music, and dance. Submit a digital file through the Steinhardt Orientation Tumblr at <http://steinhardtorientation.tumblr.com>. We will present our top submissions and winners, who will also receive a prize, at the Dean's New Student Convocation in October.