

The Choices of Success

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I was surprised to find Katie in the waiting room of my piano studio; I was sure she had already moved across Wisconsin to start her first year in college.

“Katie! I didn’t expect to see you again before you left. What’s going on?”

“I don’t think I can do it!” she burst out. “My parents say I’ll be fine ...I mean, kids go to college all the time, and they survive, right? But what if I just can’t do it? What if I’m not smart enough or organized enough or...” There were tears in her voice.

“Katie, I know how frightened you are. I started my college education when I was 49 years old, and I was afraid, too. Even as an “old” person, I was worried that I would fail more dramatically than anyone had ever failed before. Now that I’m ready to graduate, I can see that these years have been full of successes, not failures.”

She looked skeptical but hopeful. “How did you make it work?”

“Well, you just asked and answered your own question. I was the one who made it work for me, just as you will be the one who makes it work for you. But let me share some of the attitudes and actions that created success for me.

First of all, realize that a liberal arts education will change you. This is a good thing. We all grow up with a limited perspective on life. We relate to those with whom we’re most in agreement, and we believe our way is the best way—if not the only way. When we get to college we quickly learn that the world does not revolve around us or around our ethnicity, gender, or religion. We are forced to examine our biases. As we

receive more information, we are in a better position to analyze those biases and make informed choices about them.

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At 49 years of age, I was strongly opinionated about most everything. It was challenging for me to discard some of my opinions, but it was a joy to replace them with more balanced and informed viewpoints. It was also exciting to discover that many of my beliefs were solid and could inform what I was learning. As I've studied the rise and fall of civilizations, the evolution of thought and philosophy, the history of political systems, the multi-faceted characters in literature, and the intricacies of math and science, I've developed a wider perspective that requires humility from me and promotes understanding of those different from myself. I am an important person, but so is every other person. We revolve around each other.

Remember that fact when you are surrounded with new people in the dorms and in your classes. Make friends with them. Make a special effort to befriend international students; they have much to teach you about the rest of the world. In one of my classes, a Haitian student changed the direction of a negative discussion about the United States. In his wonderful French accent he said, "I think you are all too hard on your country. I have lived here three years and have not heard a gunshot or seen anyone murdered. In Haiti, I heard gunshots all the time and would see dead bodies along the road on my way to school each day." We were silent. We had not realized how much we had to learn.

If you open yourself to learning, Katie, you will repeatedly discover that you have much to learn. Remember this when you're taking your general education classes that

are not specific to your major. Students sometimes describe them as “useless classes filled with useless knowledge that I’ll never use.” Choose to view them differently. Do

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more than endure those classes; instead, get excited about learning new things—whatever they are. Instead of saying, ‘When will I ever use this information?’ say, ‘I wonder when I’ll *get to* use this information?’ This attitude will become a lifelong habit. You will always explore new knowledge with excitement, and as a result, you will always seem young, no matter how old you are.

Openness to change and the willingness to learn are essential to a successful college experience. Just as important is the development of critical and independent thought. This involves reading, listening, observing, reflecting, and discussing. It requires that you weigh many opinions and facts so that you can form your own, cogent opinion. Classroom discussions will help you refine this skill, so attend class and speak up even if you think no one wants to hear what you have to say. And even if you dislike writing papers, remember that clear articulation of your thoughts on paper is one of the best ways to think clearly. Take great pride in how you write your papers. Think of each paper as a discipline all its own, a chance to communicate concisely and with power. As you hone your writing skills, you will hone your thinking skills. In the process, you will become a more articulate speaker. Thinking, writing, and speaking are crucial to success in every professional field. A liberal arts education trains you in these skills. Cooperate with this wonderful opportunity.”

I took a breath and Katie jumped in. “You know, this all sounds great, but I don’t even know what to major in.”

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I laughed. “That’s okay! You know, I started school certain that I would become a child psychologist. But then I took my first history class and knew that history had been calling my name forever. That’s the beauty of a liberal arts education. Your exposure to many disciplines enables you to discover the field of your passion. That will help you decide on your major. After that, find ways to learn as much as possible about your chosen field. Take the tough courses from the tough professors and be tough on yourself. Do an independent study with the professor who has challenged you the most. Weave your area of greatest interest into your research papers whenever possible. Who knows? You may be starting your doctoral research as an undergraduate. Two of my professors told me it worked that way for them.

Katie, I haven’t mentioned extracurricular activities or your social life because in that aspect, my college experience has been different than yours will be. Just remember, prioritize your life so that you can always feel proud of your schoolwork. If you don’t, the stress of poor grades will outweigh the benefits of everything else.”

Katie reflected for a moment. “Okay, so let me get this straight. I need to be willing to change and open to learning. I should do everything I can to develop critical and independent thinking. When I find my passion, I should take extra steps to learn all that I can. And I need to prioritize my time. How do I start all this?”

This intelligent young woman had been my piano student for twelve years. She had always started new pieces with hesitation and now she was reluctant to start her new life.

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“Katie, it’s not hard to start. Just get up the first morning of school, put your books in your backpack, and head for class. Get there early so you can choose your favorite seat. Listen carefully and take good notes. Be determined to learn and willing to change. Give it your best effort. The rest will take care of itself.”