

MAKE COLLEGE COUNT

A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning

Derek Melleby



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Following Jesus During the Critical Years

There was snow on the ground, the sun was shining, and I was on my way back to my dorm room after class. Someone was screaming and running around a tree. As I approached, I noticed that this person wasn't wearing shoes or a shirt. He was focused and angry. Curious, and a bit scared, I asked, "What are you doing?" (Remember, this book is about learning to ask good questions. Not too shabby, huh?) If being shoeless and shirtless in the middle of winter wasn't enough evidence, the slurred speech and smell of his breath sealed the deal. He had been drinking. He whispered his answer to my question: "I'm trying to kill a squirrel. In order to kill

a squirrel, you have to become a squirrel.” Interesting. You learn something new every day!¹

This story has stuck with me because of how “normal” it was at the time. I had a conversation with a half-naked squirrel hunter and then grabbed dinner. A nineteen-year-old “man” was simply spending his Thursday afternoon drinking beer and trying to kill a squirrel with his bare hands. No one seemed to think that this was abnormal activity. He was being a college student, doing what college students do. The justification goes something like this: College is a time for you to have fun. Before you graduate to the “real world,” make sure you have as much fun as you possibly can. Try not to cause too much damage (squirrels excluded), and don’t get arrested—especially if you’re an education major. Nobody hires a teacher with a record. Popular movies about campus life often reinforce these behaviors by making it almost impossible to imagine college in any other way.

Dean Vernon Wormer

Please don’t misunderstand me. College can be fun. But you need to be careful. The experts tell us that the years between eighteen and twenty-five are considered the critical years—that is, the most shaping and influential. Every major decision that molds you for the rest of your life is typically made during this time. What kind of education will you seek? How seriously will you take your faith? Will you worship regularly at a local

church? Where will you work? Will you choose a spouse? Will you become a squirrel? Will you align yourself with a political party? What will be the central convictions of your life? How will you develop these convictions?

Let me put this into perspective. Take a few minutes to think about your life story. If you were to write an autobiography, the table of contents would look something like this:

Did You Know? The National Study of Youth and Religion found that teenagers who establish devotional habits of praying and reading Scripture are more likely to do so as adults.

Chapter 1: Birth

Chapter 2: Baby

Chapter 3: Toddler

Chapter 4: Elementary School

Chapter 5: Friends

Chapter 6: High School

Chapter 7: College (Critical Years: 18–25)

Chapter 8: ?

Chapter 9: ?

Chapter 10: ?

As you think about the most important chapters in your life story, I'm sure you would want to add some more (sports, vacations, church), but the point of the

“Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.”

Albert Einstein

exercise is to get you to ask one really big question. As you get ready to enter your *most* critical years, what kind of person do you want to become? At the moment, chapters 8 through 10 are unwritten, but chapter 7 (the critical years) will give direction to the rest of your story. One expert on the “critical years” put it like this:

What kind of person are you going to become? I’m not talking about the courses you want to take or the kind of job you want to get someday; I’m talking about the qualities you want to have. Do you desire to be wise, fair and honest—or foolish, unfair and crooked? Kind, loyal and reliable—or mean, backstabbing and unreliable? Brave, faithful and pure—or cowardly, weak and stained? Maybe you’ve thought about the kind of person you want to become but not about how to become that person. Every act, every decision, every thought will move you either a little closer to being that kind of person—or push you a little further away.²

Read the list of adjectives again: wise, fair, honest, kind, loyal, reliable, brave, faithful, and pure. My guess is that you want these adjectives to describe you. Deep down, I don’t think anyone wishes to be foolish, unfair, crooked, mean, backstabbing, unreliable, cowardly,

weak, and stained. But too often, if students are not intentional and careful about how they approach these critical years, the negative adjectives slowly take over.

I've seen it. Cheating on a test in chapter 7 often develops into cheating on taxes in chapter 10. Having multiple sexual partners in chapter 7 makes it really difficult to "settle down" and be faithful to a spouse in chapter 9. You may think it's easy to turn into a squirrel in chapter 7 and then turn back into a human, but before you know it you're on a steady diet of nuts and all your friends have bushy tails in chapter 8. You get the idea.

Don't just take my word for it. Spider-Man's uncle, Ben Parker, knew a thing or two about the critical years. He offered this advice to his nephew Peter (aka Spider-Man): "These are the years when a man changes into the man he is going to become for the rest of his life; just be careful who you change into." Of course, had he been talking to his niece, he would have included women as well. We all need to be careful about the

"These are the years when a man changes into the man he's going to become for the rest of his life; just be careful who you change into."

Uncle Ben Parker

Did You Know? According to a study by the Josephson Institute of Ethics, cheaters in high school are far more likely as adults to lie to their spouses, customers, and employers, and to cheat on expense reports and insurance claims.

kind of person we become during the critical years. “Every act, every decision, every thought” is moving you in one direction or the other. Just be careful with the direction you’re heading.

Student Interviews

Profile

Name: Christie

Interests: reading, sports, movies, family

Favorite Music: all kinds

Favorite TV Shows: *So You Think You Can Dance, King of Queens*

Favorite Movies: *Hitch, Jerry Maguire*

Favorite Books: *The Count of Monte Cristo*

Favorite Quotations: “People don’t plan to fail, they fail to plan.”

■ Would you say that your time in college has changed you? How so?

Yes. I gained great respect for those I encountered who were both academic and religious. I learned about Jesus

and nonviolent resistance and this opened me up to what faith in action has to do with societal and personal change. Also, it was during this time that I met my husband, realized my desire to work with youth in “out of school settings,” and did my own laundry for the first time.

■ Were you surprised by those changes?

I held some negative stereotypes of religious people and then I became a Christian in college. I remember my freshman year, a girl on my floor was engaged and I thought it was ridiculous to be engaged in college, and during my senior year I got engaged! When I went to college, I think I was interested in counseling and hadn't pinpointed what area or recognized that my psychology major had a lot more to it than just counseling.

Profile

Name:	Erin
Interests:	learning to play band instruments, playing fetch
Favorite Music:	Contra dance music
Favorite TV Shows:	<i>Arrested Development, Project Runway, The Office, 30 Rock</i>

- **Researchers say that the college years are critical to your formation as an adult. Do you agree?**

I don't think that if someone doesn't attend college after high school that they will somehow have trouble entering into adulthood. However, I do agree that the college years are formative ones. I think that for most students, college is a transitional period where you have most of the responsibilities of an adult but with a built-in community of classmates, roommates, and maybe teammates to help you navigate through your learning and living experiences. College is a time when many students challenge their way of thinking, checking to see if their beliefs are actually their beliefs or their parents' or friends' beliefs.

- **What changes did you see in the Erin that entered college and the Erin that graduated?**

I think the Erin that entered college was very sure of what she believed but wasn't necessarily sure why or how to explain why. She was fairly certain that choosing a college was the hardest decision she would ever have to make. She knew who she was and the kind of person she wanted to become. The Erin that left college had started thinking about the "why" more. She had many meaningful conversations in classes and with friends that made her realize

that people come from different places and worldviews and that dialogue is important. She was absolutely certain that the college decision was *not* her most difficult one but felt equipped to handle the world outside of college.

Going Deeper

1. When you think of college, what images come to mind? Where do the images come from? How does popular culture (e.g., movies and television) portray college life? Do you think you have a realistic picture of what college will be like? Why or why not?
2. Read Galatians 5:16–26. What is Paul’s basic message about the fruit of the Spirit in this passage? How might this apply to the way you approach the critical years?
3. You don’t just wake up one morning and decide to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. Spiritual growth takes time and effort. What do you think are some spiritual disciplines that will need to be practiced during the critical years to ensure that this is the direction your life is going?