

# Burbank Leader

## In Theory: Sage advice for today's graduates

June 8, 2011

Question: It's that time of year again, graduation season, when many of our youth are getting ready to leave the nest to live away from home for the first time in their lives.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our college-bound graduates when it comes to balancing experimentation and self-discovery with maintaining the integrity of their value systems?

In other words, how can a teenager remain open to personal growth through a range of new social and intellectual experiences while at the same time continue to "be themselves"?

Finally, what should a parent say or do before he or she lets a son or daughter out the door?

Answer:

I believe the words by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Hitch your wagon to a star," would be important advice for current high school and college graduates. Although it doesn't seem like the kind of idea I usually associate with Emerson, a Unitarian minister, writer and speaker, it contains some sage advice.

I don't think Emerson meant anything like what Jiminy Cricket sang about in the lyrics to the song "When You Wish Upon a Star" from the movie "Pinocchio." His words are much more weighty than that.

What I think Emerson was encouraging was a move to positive action, not just a hope or dream. Hitching your wagon to a star would be more than the simple expectation that it would happen. It would involve courage, hard work and engaging supportive helpers.

To begin with, you would have to get your wagon all the way up to a star that was numerous light years away. Then, you would have to find a way to connect your wagon to it — a seriously difficult accomplishment.

Of course, Emerson was not talking about doing such a thing literally. He was using his words as a metaphor to encourage us to reach higher and to achieve more than we could readily imagine. He was saying that we should look for a goal that is beyond something that is easily achievable and find a way to reach it. And I believe he would expect us to gain support from our families, our friends and our religious communities.

So, graduates, what is it that you want to accomplish in your life, and how can you do it? For each of us the answer will be different. For you, the most important challenge is focusing yourself on the things you intend to accomplish in both the long and short term. And then you must pledge yourself to that vision. It will take lots of determination and effort. But I believe, like Emerson, that we must all hitch our wagons to a star to reach our potential as spiritual, physical, intellectual beings.

Blessings and congratulations!

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford  
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills  
La Crescenta

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Graduates today are sallying forth into a changed world. A New York Times article this spring said that the economic crisis has created a whole “Failure to Launch” generation of young adults, ages 18-29, who are un- or under-employed and/or living with their parents.

What’s it like to go off to college with your parents’ couch and a job at Starbucks waiting for you on the other side?

Gone, for the foreseeable future, are the bright “the world is your oyster” graduation speeches. It’s brutal out there for young adults and scary and a really hard era in which to be shaping your life.

So in the first part of my very odd graduation speech I’d say: “Try not to get paralyzed. I know it’s hard, but keep making decisions and moving forward as best you can.”

In the last 10 years I’ve known countless young people who just stall and freeze up. And they don’t realize that not making a decision is, in fact, making a decision, failure to act is an action with consequences, that windows and doors don’t stay open forever and that not going through this one now may close others to you later.

“I know it’s scary,” I’d say, “but don’t get paralyzed by fear.”

I’d talk about integrity, joy and hope — and how all these things are choices, too. You have to know your center to be solid about what’s important to you and to have a sense of yourself and your gifts that’s not dependent on what’s happening around you. You have to choose to be joyful and hopeful, not because life is handing you those things, but because it’s the person you want to be.

“Keep making choices,” I’d say in my rousing conclusion. “Choose integrity. Choose joy. Choose hope. What’s true in the world today will be a different truth five years from now. Keep making choices and moving forward. Shine for the sake of shining.”

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George’s Episcopal Church

La Cañada

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For soon-to-be college freshmen, let me remind you that anything you do can and will be used against you in the court of social judgment. Get drunk and make a fool of yourself at a frat party and your indiscretion will likely be photographed and posted on Facebook or somewhere else in cyberspace. It will be the embarrassment that keeps on giving, as such things never go away. Instead, it’ll resurface someday when you attempt to land a responsible job or run for office. Not good.

Don’t do anything that leaves a permanent mark, including casual sexual behavior, which can leave you diseased or pregnant or both and which can result in death. If you have any morals at all that were instilled by your parents, don’t abandon them just because you can. You are not an animal, so don’t act like one. Your father in heaven is watching even if you’re earthly dad can no longer monitor your behavior.

Parents ought to apprise their coop-flying progeny of life’s pitfalls to avoid and not leave to chance that their kids will just “figure it out” as they go along. Forewarned is forearmed, especially when going off to school.

To both parents and students, I would suggest spiritual reinforcements be employed. Locate a church near the university and plan to attend. See if there's a Christian organization, like Campus Crusade for Christ, to help keep your spiritual feet on the ground.

Be aware that academia today is very liberal and not biblically friendly, even in some Bible colleges and Christian universities, so take left-biased, anti-Christian pontifications from professors with a grain of salt and just know that the wisdom of God outlasts every professional atheist.

As well, bone up on apologetics (Christian intellectual defenses). Never will your faith be more challenged, so stock up on resources that answer the attacks, and use the time to not only learn, but to divinely impact classmates and instructors forever. "You are the light of the world" (Mat 5:14).

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

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There is an old saying that I remember was an old saying when I was about to leave for college: "Don't let those books get in the way of your education!"

The ancient Greeks had a saying: "Know thyself." I'm also reminded of a quote from Shakespeare: "This above all, to thine ownself be true, and then thou canst not be false to any man."

So much for the old sayings. What I would add to the list is to "be compassionate." College can be a great experience but not always a pleasant experience. One of my aunts told me before I went to college that it was a lot of work but also a lot of fun. She was right about it being a lot of work, but I'm not sure about the "fun" part. And yet, I am so glad I went and so grateful to my alma mater for the experience. (There's another charity opportunity: gifts to your college!)

We are so eager for instant gratification, and I personally am not immune. But I am so grateful to my parents, who stressed going to college, and I am grateful to my college for putting up with me for four years! I wasn't a bad boy with the law, but I didn't exactly excel academically, either. Still, I am glad that I stuck it out for those four years, even if it would have been easier at the time to quit and go do something else.

So what's my advice? Get all the education you can cram into your skull. Don't expect a job that will pay you what you think you're worth, with or without your diploma.

And, for heaven's sake, don't be afraid to think new thoughts! Mom and Dad aren't always right, and maybe the political party they belong to is not the one that best suits you.

Or, as a friend of mine told me one time, "Think! It might be a new experience!"

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

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Just imagining beautiful young women and handsome young men graduating from high school, heady with excitement about going to college, I would say:

Embrace your joy and enthusiasm for life. Understand how precious life is and take care of your life. Respect the fact that you have so many gifts within you yet to be discovered and expressed.

The world needs your intelligence, your youthful energy and optimism. You may be the generation that finds cures for what we now consider terminal diseases. You may be the generation that resolves what we currently refer to as an economic crisis. You may be the generation to create peaceful dialogue with other countries and bring about disarmament with respect and treaties that the nations around the world can live by.

Most of all I would like to say “Listen to yourself and think for yourself.” Make your own wise choices. Be strong enough to stand up to others if, in your heart, they are not doing the right thing. You have deep inner wisdom within you. The best thing you can do for your life and for the lives of all those who love you is to listen to the wisdom within your heart and mind.

To the parents sending their sons or daughters off to college or to the military service or to their first full time jobs, my suggestion would be to say: “I love you, and I am proud of you.”

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley

La Crescenta

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I attended college from 1965 to 1969. During the “summer of love,” I got a job in Santa Monica and lived at the beach in Venice. That I flourished doesn't mean words of wisdom from the era will pass muster for a family newspaper.

But not to worry, nothing we say as our graduates go out the door will speak as loudly as the resounding message we delivered day by day all their lives through our parenting.

After years of being eager to escape, I spent the week before leaving home crying and terrified. My mom bucked me up with stories of her college days in the early 1930s, choosing between buying an apple then walking the miles between work and class or spending that same dime on the streetcar.

She got to visit home once in her freshman year when a local cattle transporter rounded up all the area kids attending schools in the city and gave them a ride home for Christmas in his empty truck after making a delivery. She remembered his kindness in shoveling out the manure and providing clean straw.

The message is relevant now — keep your chin up and make the best of whatever your situation. I think our college-bound understand they are lucky to have a few years before they face the job market with a degree in hand. The alternatives aren't pretty.

So, experiment and self-discover responsibly — it avoids embarrassment and worse. Eat fruits and vegetables occasionally.

Keep good friends and make lots more. Don't wash a new red sweatshirt with your sheets; learn to love pink if you forget. Read often and widely. Floss.

It's a big, wonderful, hard world out there. Let it change you, and change it, for the better in both cases. Keep us posted.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

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My best advice based on scripture is that young people would realize that God made them to know him, to serve him and to enjoy all of the good blessings he has to offer. Pursuing these purposes is the only way to fulfilling self-discovery that leaves no regrets later in life.

Experimenting with the wrong things these days can literally be fatal. We're wisest to learn from the wisdom God has revealed in scripture.

King Solomon was a man gifted with unprecedented wisdom from God. In the book of Ecclesiastes he encourages the young person: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no delight in them.'" (Ecclesiastes 12:1). He sums it all up: "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person." (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

And in regard to knowing and honoring God, we remember Jesus' exclusive claim: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

So, the best advice to give a young person heading off to college is to honor God first in all they do. In that way, they will be the kind of people he promises to bless, guide and protect all the days of their lives.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

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The college years arguably represent the most important period of a young person's life. This formative time offers a unique opportunity to shape a young man or woman's intellectual, social and spiritual identity. How these years are spent will help determine the future course of one's life and can influence whether it will turn out to be exceptional, undistinguished or somewhere in between.

The learning that takes place in a college setting — both inside and outside the classroom — will last a lifetime. However, we all know that some extra-curricular activities that take place on campus can be detrimental to one's welfare, and some are downright dangerous. Often, these activities are illegal and immoral and can seriously compromise a person's integrity.

My advice to our nation's eager young people about to embark upon the journey to college is to be thoughtful and be careful. Open your mind to learning new things, focus on gaining a sound education and apply your newfound wisdom to all areas of life — including those which fall outside of the classroom.

As for all the excited (and apprehensive) parents, I suggest they have a frank and honest discussion with their children before they head out the door. Make sure that college-bound students truly appreciate how important the next few years of their lives will be and how much knowledge they will gain from this opportunity. At the

same time, however, ensure that youngsters are aware of the perils that can befall them and how one bad decision might endanger many hours of study and hard work. Impress upon them that this new degree of freedom also comes with some new responsibilities.

Today, practically every college campus has faith-based organizations that cater specifically to the needs of students. I strongly recommend that one of the first things incoming students do after arriving on campus is make contact with the organization representing their faith and to attend some events to ensure that their moral compass remains intact. (Those students who may not identify with a religious tradition should also be aware of counseling services and peer organizations that can offer support.)

One part of becoming an adult is practicing wise decision-making, appreciating the value of self-discipline and recognizing the importance of ethical behavior, even in difficult circumstances. Students who absorb these principles will supplement all that they learn in the classroom and will emerge from college as well-rounded, mature individuals who are ready for success and happiness in the years to come.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

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When our oldest child left for college, I was struck by a variety of emotions, including the simple fact that once he goes off to college, he will only be back for visits.

I also was struck by a variety of questions, including the following. Had we done all that we could as parents to raise him appropriately? Did we instill in him the right values? What would be our role going forward? How do we counsel him about college and life going forward?

These questions, and many more, were a reflection of the fact that parents, like our children, have to learn to adapt and grow as our children get older. The good news is that our oldest child trained us for the others who have followed.

As to raising children, I'm a strong believer in the counsel provided in two scriptures. In Proverbs 22:6 it reads: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." In the parable of the wise man and the foolish man, found in Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus taught that a house built on a rock foundation will withstand the external forces of the world, while a house built on a sandy foundation will not. Matt 7:24-27.

As each child has left home, my hope and prayer was that his or her foundation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ was strong enough to meet the challenges of the "world." I continue to pray for each of them and encourage them to stay close to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

At the same time, I challenged each of them to work hard in their schooling, have varied experiences and to learn about different cultures, environments and ideas. To me, one's belief system should be challenged. Otherwise, one will not fully understand the depth, breadth, relevance and importance of that belief system.

My parenting role does not stop when a child leaves to go to college. It just changes. I enjoy my continuous conversations with our older children on many topics, including helping them as they make important life decisions.

Rick Callister

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