9-1-2010

How I spent my summer vacation

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Recommended Citation
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It is mid-June, and I am on summer vacation. In two weeks I will be assuming the presidency of Furman. For the moment, however, I am with family and friends in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. I had promised to write this essay for Furman magazine and had been counting on the reflective quietude of two weeks by the ocean to bring me inspiration and profundity. What could I have been thinking? Since when have two weeks with scores of rambunctious kids, relatives and friends in a rambling beach house been a time for reflection? With the deadline for this essay pressing on me, I took a long walk, alone, along the shore. From all the books I’d read on the topic, I knew that this is what you do for enlightenment when you visit the beach. And it worked. I had not walked a hundred yards before I experienced a brilliant flash of inspiration. With pelicans flying low in V-formation, dolphins rolling languidly in silver silhouette against the slate-blue horizon, and the shell-strewn sands crunching beneath my bare feet, it came to me. The title of my essay would be: “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.”
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OK, now I hear you thinking, “How cliché! What a dumb title! This is the brilliant insight of our new president?” Couldn’t be at least have tried walking another hundred yards?”

Don’t worry. I’ve thought of all these objections (that’s what I did over the next hundred yards), and I have answers for all of them.

There are good reasons for recounting how we spend our summer vacations. It’s no accident that this is the stock essay most of us were asked to write sometime in middle school, just as it’s no accident that we treasure our summer vacations as precious and powerful restoratives to our energy and sanity.

In my case, the story of how I spent my summer vacation has a moral to it. Now, I don’t think a good story requires a moral. I’ve read many books and seen many movies that had no particularly discernible moral, and some of them were darn entertaining. But I do think that a great story requires a moral. And as Ron Collins, author of the inspirational book From Goul to Great, reminds us, the real prize resides in the relentless push to true greatness — in not settling for anything less.

I’ve been asked to tell you how I spent my summer vacation? But what I want to tell you is how I spent my summer vacation while I was teaching. I’ve been asked to tell you about my daughter and her current boyfriend is a committed environmentalist. They are both a dad and political advisor, I had the good sense to stay out of this issue and let her figure it out. Our family discusses the need to be as competitive as group Monopoly or beach volleyball, and as immensely soulful as a night at the honkytonk. In the end, they are a large part of what life is all about and what a university is all about. At both the beach house and the university, we believe in the vibrancy of the marketplace of ideas and the common bonds of decency and dignity we share as family, friends and colleagues.

Cooking and Dining. As you might expect, I favor the role of family patriarch and commander-in-chief of the barbecue grill. My grilling is better than my singing, and if things don’t work out at Furman I’m going to open a little place in downtown Greenville.

As much as we emphasize that it’s an exhibition and not a competition, there’s something about the beach environment that brings out the chief adrenaline in many of our guests, and if you watched some of our dinners being prepared you’d think we were watching the Iron Chefs competition on the Food Channel.

The challenge, of course, is the cleanup, after everyone is satiated from the food and fun and fun. We hash it out as a great solution. We crank up the soundtrack from The Big Chill, and literally everybody in the family, kids included, gets killed with the spirit, washing dishes, taking out garbage, and wrapping food in foil while dancing like The Temptations.

OK, so where’s the moral? As graduates and friends of one of the nation’s great liberal arts universities, you understand that this is largely left to each of us to discern through the prism of our own sensibilities and experiences. Let me offer a few suggestions. My mom passed away this year, at the age of 84, joining my dad, who died seven years earlier. They never had much money, and Lord knows the idea of owning a beach house in a lovely place like the Outer Banks to host all their family and friends would have been beyond their wildest dreams, let alone their practical means. But they taught us how to do all that we did on our family vacation. At weddings and funerals, at Thanksgiving, at birthdays and Easter, at summer cookouts and neighborhood fests, they taught us what really matters.

When I traveled to Greenville with my family last December to accept the Furman presidency — the highest honor of my professional life — I took a moment to address the students about my own view of “what really matters.” I told them that the biggest is a sense in which everything that surrounds them on the running Furman campus is all about them. The lovely buildings, the fountain, the sports facilities, the music venues, the science labs...
OK, now I hear you thinking, “How cliché! What a dud title! This is the brilliant insight of our new president? Couldn’t he at least have tried walking another hundred yards?”

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There are good reasons for thinking how we spend our summer vacations. It’s no accident that this is the stock essay most of us were asked to write some time in middle school, just as it’s no accident that we treasure our summer vacations as precious and powerful restoratives to our energy and spirit.

In my case, the story of how I spent my summer vacation has a moral to it. Now, I don’t think a good story requires a moral. I’ve read many books and seen many movies that had no particularly discernible moral, and some of them were darn entertaining. But I do think that a great story requires a moral. And as Ron Collins, author of the inspirational book From Goo to Great, reminds us, the real prize inside the relentless push to true greatness — is not settling for the just good.

Yet can there be a moral to a story about a summer vacation? Or is that, as Mark Twain would say, “stretching.”

I believe a story about a summer vacation can have a moral — though I must let you be the judge. But first, here’s how I spent my summer vacation.

Playing Games. We played board games, card games, pool games, beach games, croquet games, even couch and dinner table games. A lot of the games we just made up on the spot. The highlight for physical games was a marathon wiffle ball game played on the beach in touchless winds. ESPN commentators noted that our game was probably the most memorable sporting event played in high winds since the 2006 British Cyclone. Our son Miles, a rising sophomore at Furman, was the only lefty in the lineup, which he has tried to train for after last hit into the sand dune, our beach equivalent to Fenway Park’s Green Monster. (Maybe baseball coach Ron Smith should take a look at him.) My wife Michelle, who was recovering from a knee injury, was banned by the team doctor from playing in the field but was allowed to be the designated batter, provided our son Dylan ran the bases. She proved she could still hit for power, sending a ball deep into the second set of ocean waves. Dylan cycled the bases three times before we got the ball back. Under our version of wiffle ball, which has certain rules that have been influenced by cricket, all three runs counted.

Watching Games. We watched World Cup soccer, the Stanley Cup and the NBA finals. It was a thrill to see Furman’s Clint Dempsey score the first goal for the United States in the World Cup. (See page 32.) My brother Dan from Chicago is a semi-professional folk singer and composer (he also has a day job) and Jim Gibson, a friend from Virginia, is a guitarist. It has become a beach vacation ritual for us to spend at least four nights in hostettannies (some of you may know that word) in which we sing just about every song, from folk to rock and, in a showing of the continuity of this issue and let her figure it out. Our family discussions tend to be as complex as we emphasize that it’s an environment that brings out the chef adrenaline in all of our guests, and if you watched some of our dinners being prepared you’d think we were watching the Iron Chef competitions on the Food Channel. The challenge, of course, is the cleanup, after everyone is satiated from the food and fun and fun. We drain hot on a great solution: We crank up the soundtrack from The Big Chill, and mildly everyone who’s not cooking gets up and danced while we folded the dishes, washed dishes, taking our garbage, and wrapping food in foil while dancing like The Temptations.

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When I traveled to Greenville with my family last December to accept the Furman presidency — the low honor of my professional life — I took a moment to address the students about my own view of “what really matters.” At Furman, the best advice is in something that surrounds them on the Furman campus is all about them. The lovely buildings, the fountain, the sports facilities, the music venues, the science labs,
the devoted faculty who serve as teachers, scholars, mentors and counselors, the dedicated staff who labor conscientiously to provide the myriad services that support them in their education and well-being, the alumni, trustees and other friends of Furman who donate their money, time and energy to its service — all of this is done to create an extraordinary experience for the students in their bright college years.

And so it may well seem, I told the students, that “It’s all about you!” Yet the secret to the good life, the core value that is at the center of Furman’s mission, as I told them, “is to help you realize, deep in your hearts, that this experience is not about you.”

I also said, “The most important lesson you can learn while you are here is that for your life to have authentic meaning, fulfillment and consequence, you must learn the importance of connection to forces larger than yourself: to larger causes, and to the greater community.”

Back to the beach. Of all the songs we sang, few meant more to us than an old bluegrass/gospel spiritual, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.”

That’s how I spent my summer vacation. Spending time at the beach as a parent, rather than uproot the family. But now, after living in two places and making countless two-hour drives between Richmond and Lexington, Va., and raising two children from their blended family, Michele says she is glad to put down roots in Greenville and to have miles and 9-year-old Dylan living under the same roof.

Seven hours later they awoke to a crisp fall morning. After breakfast they decided to take a quick tour of downtown. Driving south on Main Street, they admired the cafes and shops, then crossed over the Reedy River into the trendy West End and saw Falls Park, the Liberty Bridge and Fluor Field.

“I was like, ‘Wow!’” says Smolla. “The colors were beautiful. The downtown was gorgeous.”

Twenty minutes later, Michele and Miles arrived on campus to attend Fall for Furman, an event for prospective students. They saw the fountain, the manicured grounds and the colonial architecture — and like many who came before them, they were smitten.

“Within our first hours on campus Miles knew this was where he wanted to go,” says Smolla. “He loved it. We loved it. We loved it.”

Having grown up in Maryland and raised her family in Richmond, Va., Smolla says she had heard about Furman through a number of alumni. “All of them were so passionate about this place,” she says.

Now, this place has become home. In December, during a whirlwind tour and welcome, Smolla, her husband Rod, Miles and 9-year-old Dylan were introduced to the Furman community and to their new home, White Oaks.

After Rod began work in Greenville, the couple elected to maintain their Richmond home as their primary residence rather than uproot the family.

But now, after living in two places and making countless two-hour drives between Richmond and Lexington, Michele says she is glad to put down roots in Greenville and to have: Miles, Coren (13) and Dylan living under the same roof. Their other two children from their blended family, Sarah and Erin (both in their early 20s), live outside the home.

Michele Smolla had never seen Greenville or Furman when she drove into town in the early morning of September 27, 2008.

It was 1 a.m. She and her son, Miles Taylor, exited at Interstate 385 into downtown Greenville, took a left into the Heart Regency parking lot, quietly checked in, and went to bed.

“Was that the big joke around school,” she laughs. “But I grew up in that atmosphere and absolutely loved it.”

The experience sparked a lifelong passion for psychology. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Maryland-College Park, and her master’s degree in social work from the University of Maryland-Baltimore. After graduate school she worked for several years with a child advocacy agency, visiting institutional homes and placing children with foster parents. She left the workforce after Sarah was born.

But she continued to work with children as a volunteer, tutoring third- and fourth-grade students in Richmond City Schools through a mentoring program sponsored by her church. She has also been a volunteer at the Marymount Cancer Institute.

Always athletic, Smolla grew up playing field hockey, lacrosse and rugby. Later she took up tennis and skiing until two knee injuries forced her to limit her physical activities to golf and walking.

“I tore both of my ACLs (anterior cruciate ligaments) skiing,” she says. “I lost one in the Grand Tetons and the other in the Rockies.”

After their two-week vacation at North Carolina’s Outer Banks in mid-June, the Smollas began the process of transferring their family to White Oaks and became acclimated to the Uptown summer.

“Do you ever get used to your glasses fogging up?” she laughs.

The biggest challenge so far, she says, will be setting priorities. “We are moving to a community where everyone is so accepting,” she says. “You want to do so many things, to meet so many people. You want to get to know everyone.”

— JOHN ROBERTS

Adapted from an article in the Spring 2010 issue of Inside Furman, the university’s internal newsletter.

Ready to make Greenville, Furman home.