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Grads in the Spotlight: Lessons Learned

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From the Bell Tower to the bombs in the Middle East, and from our first glance of the Furman fountains to our fear on 9/11, we of the class of 2003 have wavered between the security of what we call the “Furman Bubble” and the reality of the world outside. From the teachers who doted on us to the terrorists who terrified us, and from the comforts of college life that assured us to the global crises and future careers that worry us, we have reluctantly faced an internal battle this year, a battle between the safety of Furman and the uncertainty of tomorrow.

Although some of us may possess promising plans for our lives after departing from the Furman Bubble, we cannot help but look toward tomorrow with a dizzying mixture of excitement, confusion and fear. With this in mind, it’s understandable that we dread waving adieu to what’s often called “the best years of our lives.” And it’s understandable that we may falter before heading off into a horizon that’s somewhat hazy. For as much as I’ve learned here at Furman, I still ask: What does tomorrow hold? And who am I anyway? And what’s the meaning of this whirring, dizzying experience known as life?

No, I haven’t eclipsed the entire field of philosophy and found the meaning of life. However, I do think I have compiled a pretty good list of lessons learned throughout my Furman career. Some of these lessons were extracted from personal experience; others were sparked by professors’ lectures. But no matter what prompted or provoked these lessons, I’m confident that they are worth voicing on this momentous occasion, on this graduation from one world and this passage into the next.

My first life lesson involves dealing with defeat and disappointment. Yes, despite the general security of Furman, we certainly encountered days that were long or tough or just otherwise bad. There were never-ending nights of studying and stressing, but there were also more difficult times and tasks that emerged. The job search cast a gloomy shadow over our lives, the news of a family member’s illness jarred us, the death of a friend and classmate left us angry and confused. Indeed, whether we were plagued by physical or emotional or political obstacles, all of us dealt with disappointment and defeat at times.

Still, my experiences over the past four years taught me that the ways in which we deal with such hardships are often more significant than the hardships themselves. Despite the emergence of obstacles in our lives, it is our responsibility and our privilege to deal with these disappointments



in the best manner possible. As our lives, the lives of those around us, and history in general have shown us, sometimes believing is not far removed from achieving.

The next lesson is one I had gradually grasped throughout my life, but its importance solidified for me during my time at Furman. In short, lesson number 2 is that individuality is key. But how, and why? Thanks to English professor Vincent Hausmann, I realized that an amazing, unparalleled beauty exists in the unique expression of independent films, films that defy all conventions and leave you awake at night. Thanks to English professor Willard Pate’s discussions of Flannery O’Connor, I recognized that eccentricity and absurdity possess a vast degree of wonder.

And when we look beyond Furman to history and all forms of art, it’s hard to deny the value of individuality. Indeed, Robert Frost suggested we follow the road less traveled, and Jim Morrison and the Doors encouraged us to break on through to the other side. If artists, politicians and scientists did not challenge the norm, society could not progress. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the importance of pondering, questioning and challenging, for within this spirit resides the progress of tomorrow.

Let me introduce the last lesson with a confession.

This past winter, my roommates and I lost electricity in our off-campus apartment for a couple of exceedingly long days and nights. Because our apartment was frigid and dark on one particular January evening, I decided to trek to Furman Hall to study for a test. By the time I finished studying around 3 a.m., I was exhausted. All I longed to do was sleep, but the thought of my icy igloo of an apartment was anything but comforting.

I paced around Furman Hall and pondered what to do. Slowly I shuffled over to a window — and suddenly I saw it, glimmering outside in all its glory: the Earle Infirmary. Yes, thanks to a very kind

nurse, I spent the night in the infirmary even though I was 100 percent well. The nurse woke me up the next morning in time for my test, served me orange juice and told me to come back whenever I wanted. So the next time you have doubts about the Howard Johnson’s or Marriott, you might want to check out Furman’s infirmary.

Actually, the real lesson in this case rests on the significance of asking for help. Whether it’s directions for a road trip or advice on the best insurance company, one should never suffer the injustice attached to the fear of seeking assistance. We are not expected to have all the answers, and let’s face it, we never will. Yet whether the question at hand deals with the price of tea in China or someone’s personal take on the meaning of life, we should never be too proud or too frightened to request help. If I fail to ask for another’s help when I need it, I fail to glean the knowledge or aid that he or she could potentially offer.

In review, my life lessons are:

- Number 1: Believe in yourself and view your defeats as challenges to overcome.
- Number 2: Don’t be afraid to question the norm. If we didn’t forge new paths, progress would be impossible.
- Number 3: Learn the value of asking for help. No one has all the answers, and getting assistance is all right.

In no way is this list complete. However, it does constitute a collection of lessons I will carry with me into the real world. And hopefully, these lessons will serve as a compass when I’m lost.

Our position right now is a precarious one, for we are hovering between the realm of college and the adult world. While many of us may be tempted to feign confidence and pretend that we have all the answers, the truth is that we’re bluffing. Bluffing may be acceptable in a round of cards, but it’s not worthwhile in the game of life.

We may waver between memories of the Bell Tower and memories of the first bombs in Iraq. We may waver between pleasant thoughts of past teachers and paralyzing thoughts of past terrorists. But that’s OK, because it is this uncertainty, this doubt, this faltering, this flickering that manifests itself in the essence of life. And whether we’re confident or crying, whether we’re right or wrong, whether we’re winning or losing, at least we are living.

And as long as we are living and believing and challenging ourselves daily, we are on the right path to succeeding.