

Danville News Column
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“Graduation realities”
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Congratulation graduates! Graduation literally means (if you studied Latin, you know this already), you’ve made the grade, attained the degree, taken the next step. You’re a graduate. God bless you. God help you.

You beam a wide galaxy of hopes. All of you will be surprised. But not all of you will do it well. A father once scolded me for despoiling the illusions about graduation. Breakups. Breakdowns. Breakouts. Missteps. Sidesteps. Back steps. Stumble steps. Two steps forward, one step back (for the fortunate). None of you will do it as planned.

My task today compares with our Lamaze-Birthing-Baby-Nurse 29 years ago who spent one session discussing possible birth defects. At the end she suggested that having addressed these issues, we tuck them away in the sock drawer of our minds and pull them out only if we need them.

Does the High School guidance department track what happens and why to the graduating class during the first two years after graduation? Maybe a cub reporter from High School should. We might also consider how come out of a class of 185 this year, only 56 signed up to be considered for scholarships? Of that 56, fewer signed up for specific scholarships, filtering themselves out for a variety of reasons (class rank, financial need, career goal, number in family, siblings enrolled, community involvement). I am curious as to the mindset that led so many of our high school seniors simply not to bother. My hope is that next year every senior will go crazy and sign up for everything, thus totally flummoxing, thrilling, the scholarship committee.

Whether entering the workforce or school, it can turn pretty ugly. Derailed, detoured, new decisions, bad decisions, dreams damaged by the decisions of others. Bombing out. Students changing majors or transferring to different schools. Lazy, incompetent professors. Fights with roommates. Roommates more interested in getting drunk than learning. The roommate who got pregnant her first semester (putting a new spin to trimester).

I remember one graduate years ago who was eager to go to College, mostly for the chance to enjoy spring break. She envisioned it would be as much fun as the spring breaks specials on MTV and VH-1. She discovered spring break mostly involves a lot of vomiting.

Reality check: exactly how many terrific Danville sports stars have gone on to play professional sports?

We congratulate one Grove young man who ranks among the first Danville students attending a certain Penn State campus to finish the year without an underage drinking citation.

Those High School A's can turn into College D's when you fail to attend class or work at learning. Pretty basic.

Are you going to school to learn a career or to become liberally educated? Both are valid. Invalid is because you don't know what else to do. Nor are College diplomas guarantees today of higher income or success. Perhaps there's merit in returning to pre-World War II statistics when only 5% of adult men and 3% of adult women completed a Bachelor's Degree (as opposed to 30% for both men and women today).

A healthy national debate would discuss: 1) are too many students going to college? 2) are there too many colleges?

Higher education use to be exactly that: equipping "capable and cultivated human beings" (John Stuart Mill, 1867). Instead, too many Universities and Colleges now sell themselves as institutions for adolescents to transition into (or postpone) adulthood. The College industry can be just an alternative form of day care.

Want to know a secret? Adults still are making it up. We're still graduating from one degree to the next. The worst part (and best part) of becoming an adult is rudely discovering that you are entitled to absolutely nothing. Not respect. Not love. Not success. All you can do is earn it, deserve it. For life is the art of improvisation. Adaptation. There still is so much to learn. The trick is to improvise well. Which is tough. It should be tough. If easy, it never is worth it. The sin of easy.

These are precious days. Our gift to you is an age where needs exceed resources. The only thing ever going to come to you is nothing. These days require us to accept how the trick isn't what you get from it but what you bring to it. For God's sake, produce something.

Graduate, we're proud of you. Though far more important is if you're proud of who you are and what you do.