

Chapel Talk
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While driving to a cross country meet last November, I heard an advertisement announce that, "choosing the right college is one of the most important decisions of your life." Naturally, the ad went on to provide some advice on this most important of life's decisions. The right college was, of course, the one paying for the ad. But I don't want to quibble with the ad's conclusion (that a school called "Goldey Beacom College" is the best). Although US News and World Report describes this institution as one of the "least selective" in admissions, and gives it no overall rank, I have no real reason to question the claim that Goldey Beacom College is indeed the ideal place to embark on a successful life. But, like I said, I don't want to focus on which colleges are best. I suspect many of you have already considered this question far too much. Instead, tonight I want to address a belief that I consider more suspect than the preeminence of Goldey Beacom College.

This more suspect claim is that it matters a great deal where you go to college-- that choosing a college (or being chosen by one) is an important life event. I suspect some of you subscribe to this view. As one commentator on the American college admissions process put it: "Winning admission to an elite school is imagined to be a golden passport to success; . . . failing to do so is seen as a major life setback".

Tonight, (with juniors just beginning the "college process", with SATs coming on Saturday, and with seniors concerned about pending applications) seems a good time to examine this idea. After looking at the college question, I hope to interest you in a broader question: What are the most important decisions in life?

Back in the year 1986, after opening the dreaded thin envelope from, my first choice college (Williams College) I weighed, my second and third choices: on one hand there was Haverford College-- a small, selective, private, liberal arts college founded in 1833

by Quakers in a Philadelphia suburb. And on the other hand, Swarthmore College—a small, selective, liberal arts college founded in 1867 by Quakers in a Philadelphia suburb. If only I had heeded the warning of our radio ad man: I might have agonized over the decision. I might have poured over rankings and scrutinized every last sentence on each school's web page. But, of course, in 1986 there were no web pages, and I don't remember any agony.

Instead, I analyzed the matter like this: one of my older brothers, Mike, was then a freshman at one of the colleges. So I chose the other. Oh, how could I have been so fickle and irresponsible! Imagine how much better my life would be today if only I had chosen the more selective of these two colleges. How could I have let this most important of life's decisions depend on something as trivial as not wanting to be known as "Mike's little brother."

And so, as I listen to the refrain of the radio pitch, you can imagine the depths of my despair. I had blown the call on this most important decision of life.

Or had I?

When I ask students why they think it is important that they go to an elite college, they invariably respond that if they do not get into an elite college they won't get a great job. From there, I am told, you will be just a few short steps from being thrown (like the third servant in tonight's gospel reading) into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. We will come back to the three servants in Matthew's Parable of the Talents [Matthew 25: 14-30] near the end of tonight's talk.

Let's stay with the college question for a while more. Will there be weeping and gnashing of teeth if you do not attend an elite college?

There are several ways to approach this question. The simplest way is to equate income with success, and evaluate the question statistically. A 2004 Atlantic Monthly article

entitled “Who Needs Harvard” took this approach. The author found that the salaries of elite-college graduates were not significantly higher than the salaries of comparable graduates of less prestigious colleges.

But perhaps, salary is not the same as success. I suspect few of us would use salary as the only metric in evaluating the career success of someone like Jesus or Gandhi.

At this point you are probably anticipating that I will now denounce money and equate success with selflessness, inner peace and a heroic level of civic engagement. Perhaps one day I will be able to unhypocritically deliver such a talk. Today is not that day. Instead, tonight, I want to report on a simple study I performed.

Back in the fall of last year I sent an email to the Community Center conference asking people to send me the names of people they thought successful. Over the past months I have looked up the educational backgrounds of these people. Are most of them graduates of the most elite undergraduate colleges?

The answer is clearly, no. Of the 58 names submitted only four earned bachelors degrees from Ivy League colleges. About ten more went to highly selective non-ivies. Almost everyone else on the list went to colleges that range from the second-tier to totally obscure. Unfortunately, I don't have time to show you all 58 people, but I do want to present a slide show covering a fair number. I will post the full results of my survey in an email to the community. If the findings of my, admittedly flawed, study seem wrong to you, I invite you to make your own list of successful people and look up their backgrounds.

Since the “talents” mentioned in Matthew's gospel are units of currency, and the master was evaluating his servants' investment choices, I begin the slideshow with an investor:

So, if it is true that attending an elite college is not a golden passport to success, and if attending a less elite college is not a major life setback, then what are the important

decisions in life? This thought seized me as I continued to drive my car to the cross country meet. Perhaps it was my decision to marry Ms. Kerrane, or my decision to become a teacher or a father. Yet, each time I tried to single out any one, big decision I found it impossible to isolate. The decision to marry Ms. Kerrane is small when compared to the thousands of daily decisions I make about HOW to be married to her. The decision to become a father is small when compared to the many small, daily decisions on what kind of father to be. The boundless blessings these decisions have bestowed could easily be lost, simply by making a series of small, perhaps imperceptibly small, daily decisions on how to be a husband or a father or a teacher. Because it is the small, daily decisions, (which is to say our habits) that matter most of all, it should now be clear why it doesn't matter where you go to college. What obviously matters much, much more is HOW you go to college. For those who have enjoyed dumb luck in the college process, I recommend you start preparing for your luck to run out. For those who feel unlucky, I am confident that the habits you practice in your college's classrooms, laboratories, libraries and dorm rooms will quickly overshadow the affects of decisions made in admissions offices.

The three servants in today's parable were given three different amount of money, by a stern master. Two of them used the money to make more. The third buried the money in the ground and returned the original amount to the master. Whether due to laziness or fear, this third servant risked nothing and did not strive. He played it safe. This servant is like the college student who squanders his parents' money choosing only the safest classes and activities and doing only just enough to survive academically. He is like the student who retreats from classmates of different backgrounds into a homogeneous social group. He is like the partygoer who chooses the sure-bet of intoxication over the challenges of relationships. He is like the workaholic, so absorbed in his own success that others are kept at arm's length.

My message tonight is not that SATs don't matter, nor that college doesn't matter. Rather, it is that each day of your life matters about as much as every other. There is really nothing special about the days you spend opening mail from The College Board or

from college admissions offices. Just like every other day, these letter-opening days provide an opportunity to practice good habits of mind, body and spirit.

Related Documents

Who Needs Harvard

http://library.standrews-de.org/lists/ChapelTalks/CTFaculty/o'connell_02-27-2008_who_needs_harvard.pdf

A Small, Informal Survey of the Education Background of “Successful” People

http://library.standrews-de.org/lists/ChapelTalks/CTFaculty/o'connell_02-27-2008_survey.pdf