

A Typical Semester? Let's Hope Not

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A scholar who loves comfort is not fit to be called a scholar—Confucius

Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof—John Kenneth Galbraith

Stubbornness does have its helpful features. You always know what you are going to be thinking tomorrow—Glen Beaman

I put a dollar in one of those change machines. Nothing changed—George Carlin

For those paying attention, there is a theme here. So let's get on with it. I want you to pull out the photos you were asked to bring. If you did not get, or rather did not pay attention to the email that went out Tuesday, check your wallet, purse, cell phone, etc., and look for one, or several. In particular, we're looking for a photo from your high school days. You should know that I've also asked faculty and staff to bring along such photos. Whereas many of you have high school photos on your Iphone, faculty often had to search archives such as steamer

trunks, and Ellis Island documents to find the same.....it says here, wait for laughter to die down. Anyway, if you have those photos with you, let's take a look at them for just a minute or so. If you don't, check out the photos among those around you. My guess is that your seatmates are already looking over your shoulder, and you are likewise stealing glances at those around you.

Why do we do this? Well, we're curious. There's a story behind the photo. There's something to be known. You see, the vast majority of us not only did not know each other in high school, we literally had no concept of each other. Yes, some few of you came to Catawba together from high school, but the people you've encountered here are nearly all new. So, a photo from those bygone days present us with more questions than answers.<<<By the way. How many of you are laughing at those photos?>>> Are any of you embarrassed by those photos? Anyone nostalgic?

OK, let's now do something together. I'd like for you to try to put yourself back in the shoes of that person, that person who was you, as represented in the photo you hold. Who was that person? What were their dreams and aspirations? What were their fears? What interested them, or troubled them? What was the most significant thing going on in their lives at the time of that photo? Who were their friends? What did they think about parents, siblings, teachers? Whom did they pay attention to in popular culture? What music did they listen to, and how did

they listen to it? What was cool? What would cause them to be serious? What was their idea of fun? You get the idea. That person in that photo is you; or perhaps more existentially put, that person in that photo was you.

Let's think about that person in the photo for just a bit. Until coming to Catawba most of the important decisions made about you, and your life, were made by others. While this sounds so obvious as to seem hardly worth mentioning, it is this obviousness that often makes the significance so difficult to see. You did not choose your family members, the primary language you speak, the locale or region of the country in which you lived. You did not even choose your name. You likely did not choose your schools, and thus did not have much influence on the teachers and curriculum with which you were presented. You had little impact on the socio-economic circumstance of your family (with the exception as an expense!), nor on the employment of your parents. All of these circumstances and variables of life were essentially handed to you.

The people who handed them to you, your parents and extended family members, neighbors, religious leaders, and even school board members, bankers, doctors, and politicians, were generally well meaning. They wanted for you to have a good, meaningful, and productive life. There were many others with less well-intentioned interests, who nonetheless were just as influential. These included all sorts of people and entities interested in your consumer habits. So, from day one you've

been bombarded with media of all sorts designed to influence what you believe you need, how you perceive yourself, and perhaps most importantly, how you spend your money.

And now here you are, in January 2010, at the beginning of another semester of college. Classes have already begun. And the patterns of this particular community have begun to settle in. For many of you, coming back to campus after the semester break was indeed, coming home. In fact, some of you said such words while visiting families; some for the first time.

Depending on your families, such statements lead to a wide array of parental responses, from sadness and melancholy (our baby has left us), to relief that their patterns can now return to normal (food doesn't vanish from the refrigerator so quickly, among other things). You have reacquainted with friends, classmates, faculty and staff. A typical year in college resumes.

But the point of the photos and the questions is to illustrate the fact that this is not just another spring semester at Catawba College. It is your semester, and there is work to be done. So let's reconsider those questions from our previous examination of the photos: Who am I now? What are my dreams and aspirations? What are my fears? What interests or troubles me? What is the most significant thing going on in my life right now? Who are my friends? What do I think about my parents, siblings, teachers? Whom do I pay attention to in pop culture? What music do I listen to, and how do I listen to it? What is

cool? What would cause me to be serious? What is my idea of fun?

Now compare your answers on these questions to those of the person in the photo. What has stayed the same? What has changed? Think about it. Really.....think about it. While you are certainly recognizable, you are just as certainly not the same person as the one in the photograph. But how are you different? Consider the following.

You who are students have essentially lived your lives since about 1990. If we could have taken a photo of the times since then, not simply a photo of you, what might be our point of focus? Put another way, what has been happening beyond the immediacies of our personal networks which have also shaped us? Since 1990 we've seen the remarkably peaceful dissolutions of the Soviet Union, as well as the system of apartheid in South Africa. At the same time America has been involved in three wars in the middle east, and numerous other peacekeeping efforts, from Somalia to the Balkans. We've seen the rise of the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—as major economic and political actors around the globe. We've suffered disasters and tragedies from 9/11 to Katrina, to the most severe recession since the Great Depression. Simultaneously we have lived together in times unparalleled in technological advances; cell phones, iPods, Facebook, Twitter, hybrid cars, Mars rovers; medical decoding of the human genome, bionic body parts, cloning; and 40 years after the assassination of Martin Luther

King, Jr. at the height of the civil rights movement, we elected Barak Obama, as President of the United States. And, while some of us don't yet get the concept of an avatar, many of you have already been to see Avatar, in 3D!

You could make your own lists covering the past twenty years, and some of you are doing just that right now. That's fine.

Actually, I hope that at least for the next few days and perhaps even weeks, you do just that. I did something like this once with my father-in-law, Bill, a farmer with an 8th grade education, a WWII veteran of the South Pacific and, most importantly, a good man. When I asked Bill, and a few other family members and neighbors sitting around the kitchen table, to reflect on the most significant development of technology in their lifetimes, what do you think they said? "Electricity." I asked that question barely ten years ago, by which time all of you here were well on your way to Catawba.

Draw from this anything you might want. However, here's one observation. The pace of change in and around our lives is unrelenting, regardless of the scale—family and community, or national and global. Much of it is for good, and is a product of well-reasoned intentions. Other change is just as well-reasoned, but is clearly not intended for good. Many times we get a mixture of both; well-reasoned intentions with very poor, often harmful results. For example, Catawba's Center for the Environment daily works to counter the unintended and negative effects on our air, water, and soil of the normal activity of living

life in America. Add to this equation the variables of scale and the unexpected or unanticipated. Such combinations are this moment being faced by the good people of Haiti, who are dealing not only with a natural geologic event, a 7.0 earthquake, but devastation exacerbated literally by centuries of economic, political, and social exploitation and poverty. We can clearly see how challenging it is to meaningfully respond. I'm wondering if we might also learn how better to anticipate, not just earthquakes, but the connections and consequences of the lives we live?

Here's what I would like to suggest. Do not let this time simply be the start to another spring semester at Catawba College. As exceptional as Catawba is, and has been, what matters is what we do next—what we think next, how we go to class next, how we greet each other next, how we resolve the individual and collective challenges we all face next, what we dream next. The top of the college's homepage on the web says: Our Purpose, Your Promise. This is clearly a statement about what is next. So while it is necessary to know where you stand, it is ultimately more important where you are heading. You are moving from dependence on the family and community that has invested in you thus far—including their definitions of what is valuable in life—to dependence on a broader community of persons, ideas, and values. More importantly, it means you must make choices, often about issues that you have not even considered. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "Be not conformed to the patterns

of this world, but be transformed through the renewal of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve God’s will—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”

It is in this regard that at Catawba College, you are positioned within a context, rather a community, which is increasingly rare in higher education. Only about 15% of all undergraduate students find themselves in small, private, teaching-focused institutions with comprehensive programming from music and theater to athletics and student government. In such contexts you are confronted not only with new ideas and perspectives, but with new and intense relationships. Those include your fellow students, staff, administrators, and faculty. They also include a legacy of alumni and friends of Catawba. All are more than just interested in you, they are also committed to, and invested in your future. The evidence for this is all around you, but I would like to call particular attention to the function of time.

What sets Catawba apart, and what sets apart your experience as a college student, is the willingness of all those just mentioned to give you their time, and therefore to give you themselves. We’re not always the brightest or most talented—though we certainly have more than our fair share of such attributes. But the character of those who have chosen to serve your best interests is on display daily all across this campus. Sometimes it is the helping hand, and sometimes it is the firm hand. Sometimes it is in the classroom, and sometimes the hallway.

Sometimes on the courts and playing fields, and sometimes overseas. In fact, while the lecture or the class session is often the focus of our schedules, our progress towards a degree, and even the prying questions of Mom and Dad as to how we are doing, it is these other settings and the interactions that happen within them that have the most significant impact. Every college has math professors, but how many have Professor Zerger, whose Kansas mannerisms put us at ease and create opportunity to make sense of the abstract. Every college has psychology professors, but I'm positive that none have a Professor Brownlow, for obvious reasons. Other colleges have choirs, but how many have Professor Oakley? How many would want Professor Oakley? How many other colleges have Linda Hamilton, Chip Hester, Sharon Newsome, or Tiffany Hunter? The point is, these are people, known to you by name, who also know you by name. You are not an abstract individual, but person with a promise. However, promise is not self-actualization. We need the other in our lives as a secure point of reference, and as one who challenges to our status quo.

Therefore, here's my challenge to you, and the real purpose of this address today. Do not go about these next days in typical fashion. Reflect not only on who that person was, in the photograph you brought with you, but on the person you are becoming. However, don't do so in isolation. Call on the rest of us to participate. Put another way, ask to see each other's photo, and ask those questions we've already considered. We do it on

Facebook, but try it out in person. I have to admit, I'd be interested in hearing the answers, and perhaps even seeing the photos. Can you imagine Professors McCachren, Bitzer, Osterhus, or Green, or Coach Gantt, Carol Gamble, Officer Flowe, or even President Turner as a high schooler? Maybe I don't want to go there...but maybe you should.

Dr. Rick Stephens
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