



“REFLECTIONS”

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The KAV

To all of you Emergent Scholars, let me add my congratulations to you for your academic accomplishments. You have talent, but you have also added to it that rare quality, discipline. To attain the consistent level of excellent grades that you have earned, you have often had to sacrifice free time, you have had to give up doing many other things that you would have probably much more enjoyed doing—just think of all the video games that you will never be a master at!—and you have had to juggle multiple demands on your energies—various courses with differing schedules, campus activities, jobs, and family obligations. Many of you must feel that you’re in the middle of a whirlwind of demands on your time and energy. Perhaps many of you are wistful about having to spend a great deal of time alone, studying or writing, in order to achieve what you have accomplished. Doing things with others, engaging in campus life, or accomplishing academic milestones are all wonderful ways to use your time. I would suggest that you also cherish those times when you are alone, and not use them solely for studying. They may be the most precious moments of your life.

In the midst of all of the work that you have done and will need to continue to do in the future, you should take time to reflect. You should spend minutes, if not, at times, an hour or two, in “reflection.” “Reflect” is one of those interesting words that can seem so simple yet are packed with

meaning. The oldest meaning of the word was to “to turn into or away from a course,” similar to what we mean today when we say something was “deflected.” More contemporary meanings draw upon the mirror, which, historians will tell you, is a surprisingly modern invention in its current form. Only in the nineteenth century, with the invention of “silvering” on the back of the clear glass by the German chemist Justus von Liebig, was it possible to manufacture mirrors in large quantities for common use by the mass of the population.

To “reflect” is to give back or exhibit something or make something apparent. Two meanings of “reflect” and “reflection” have evolved from this core meaning. In the first meaning, to reflect upon something is to look at it—either with our eyes or in our mind--and bounce it back and forth from one version of its image to another. There is a similar meaning in physics where “reflection” refers to the return of light or sound waves from a surface.

What are we doing when we “reflect” upon something, when we engage in reflection? A “reflection” is a thought, idea, or opinion formed because we have meditated upon some chance remark, the germ of an idea, or a fragment of a dream. These times of meditation can be our most creative moments. They most often happen when we are alone. One of the myths of our age is that group activities are supremely important for significant work to get done. Extroverts, people who project themselves and seem to thrive on being with other people, are seen as leaders and doers. They certainly play an important role in society, business, and politics.

But while extroverts have their strengths, so do introverts. Introverts are not necessarily shy people. They are people who are comfortable spending time alone doing things that they enjoy. Introverts often possess special gifts. They can find it easy to spend time in reflection. Alone, they can reflect, ponder, meditate, analyze, and create. Solitude often breeds innovation. Susan Cain is the author of a wonderful book, Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking. As Cain points out, without introverts, the world would not have:

The theory of gravity

The theory of relativity

Yeats' "The Second Coming"

Chopin's nocturnes

Proust's In Search of Lost Time

Peter Pan

Orwell's 1984 and Animal Farm

The Cat in the Hat

Charlie Brown

"Schindler's List," "E.T.," and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind"

Google

or

Harry Potter

Where we would be without Harry Potter—or The Cat in the Hat, for that matter! Steve Jobs was the dynamic, often tyrannical, obsessive soul of Apple Corporation. Jobs could pour all his energies into making groups of engineers, programmers, and designers carry out projects beyond what they thought they could ever do. The genius behind the creation of Apple's first products, however, was not Steve Jobs. It was Steve Wozniak, who worked alone and famously declared, "I don't think anything really revolutionary was invented by a committee."

This is not to say that everyone should cultivate introversion, any more than that the current fad in American life of celebrating extroversion is right. As the great psychologist Karl Jung said, "There is no such thing as a pure extrovert or pure introvert. Such a person would be in an insane asylum."

What I would recommend to you is to be open to reflection. If you tend to introversion, cultivate the power to reflect. If you tend to extroversion, realize the virtues of reflection. Practice it if you can, and draw strength from those around you who can share their reflections with you. The beauty of collaboration is the different strengths we bring to it, not our sameness.

Reflection is also important for another reason. Reflection, in the sense of turning things over in our mind, pondering what we have done, weighing our choices, helps us see who we are, or, rather, what we reflect to others. This is the second meaning of “reflection” that has evolved. Remember that to “reflect” is to give back or exhibit something or make something apparent. If someone does something admirable, we say, “that reflects well on his character.” The use of “reflection” in physics where “reflection” refers to the return of light or sound waves from a surface actually captures both senses: bouncing back and forth of something, like pondering a thought or an idea in our minds, but also the revelation of an image from another source.

If we allow ourselves to stop in our busy activity, rest in solitude for a few moments with only our own self for company, we can ask, “Who am I to others?” “When others see me, what do I reflect?” A great deal of what we are has been learned, absorbed, or drawn from others. Who have we allowed to influence us? What have we spent time doing? What have we read? Or, better, which websites have we been wedded to and what have we gleaned from them? Whatever it is we have done, has hugely influenced who we are. And that is what we reflect for others. The two senses of “reflection”—the turning over or bouncing things back and forth in our minds and the presentation of ourselves to others—can be deeply intertwined. If we stop and reflect, in the sense of pondering, and we decide that we do not like what it is we are reflecting or presenting to others, then time well spent in reflection is one of the very few ways we have to change what it is that we are reflecting.

One marks one’s life, if you have children, by the arc where one begins by teaching your child everything, it seems, and then, the older, and hopefully wiser, one becomes, the more your child teaches you. I’m old enough now to have learned a lot from my children. (Some things, of course, I

can never learn. My son has never been able to get me to appreciate punk music, much less thrash, grunge, or the various other sub-genres of punk.) My daughter has had more success. After years of prodding, she's gotten me to "journal," that is, to keep a diary in a small notebook. In that journal, I have been forced, not just to record the events of the day, but also to "reflect" upon what I'm feeling, what I am doing with my life, and by what I'm allowing myself to be influenced. Her journals began at age seven and now number 30 volumes, I believe. My efforts are much less voluminous, and undoubtedly much less insightful. I have learned, nonetheless, a great deal by reflecting in my journal. If you want to examine who you are, if you want to understand what it is you reflect to others, if you need to develop your character, I highly recommend keeping a journal of your reflections. What you learn in your classes, the books you read, the projects you carry out in your major, and the activities you're involved in on campus—all of these become richer and more meaningful if you—yes, reflect upon them. And in doing so, you can grow in order to reflect the best that you would hope to present to others.

You have achieved a great deal. You have much before you. In your remaining years here at the College, take advantage of every reasonable opportunity to stretch your talents and experience. Study Abroad, research with a faculty member, internships, service learning, leadership in organizations like clubs, teams, student senate, participation in Called to Lead—all of these will develop you as a person still more, and as an intellectual. The College has a particular interest in encouraging you to apply for prestigious external fellowships—Rotary, Fulbright, Boren, Truman, Gates, Marshall, Rhodes, etc. These awards can make an enormous difference in furthering your careers. Please talk to your faculty advisors or see Joel Janisewski, Director of the Prestigious Scholarships Program, for more information about applying for these awards.

Congratulations again. Achieve, but also reflect. Enjoy others, but spend time in reflection. Remember that what you reflect reveals who you are and what you hold to be most important. You have our best wishes as you pursue your careers.