

CHAPTER 1

Conversations with Professor Eberhardt

I will never forget my first day on campus. I stood in front of the college gazing at the massive ivy-covered buildings, my childish face holding wonder like a cup. My reverie was interrupted, however, when a senior in a dune buggy nearly ran me down. Not to be sidetracked, I picked myself up, dusted off my soiled tunic, and headed for Professor Eberhardt's office.

Professor Eberhardt was the sage-like patriarch of the school - a man of learning and letters. It was he who once said, "An education is a wonderful thing. No college should be without one." But more than this, he was to be my adviser for the coming year. This astute preceptor would be my guide as I embarked on the long and perilous journey from ignorance to knowledge. My fate was in his hands.

I fairly radiated as I entered his office for the first time. He was just as I had pictured him - a venerable white-haired man, clad in a gray tweed suit, and wearing pince-nez glasses.

"Sit down, my boy," he mumbled, pointing to a chair.

"Thank you," I said, making a low curtsy. "My boy," he began, "let me take this opportunity to bid you an official welcome to college. And let me assure you that I am your friend." I smiled gratefully.

"You see," he continued, as he strolled about the room. "The primary reason you are here is to become a well-rounded person. Your instruction at this school should allow

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you to speak intelligently on nearly every topic. This is what we mean when we speak of a liberal education.”

I nodded.

“You see, Kurt - “

“Excuse me, but my name is Keith,” I interjected.

“Oh, yes. You see, Keith, there are a great many people today who possess wealth and wield power but are sadly lacking when it comes to a liberal education. Let us hope that your time here will be spent acquiring this type of training.” Then he suddenly spun around, pointed his finger at me, and shouted, “When does an oryx mate?”

“I-I-I-I don’t know,” I stammered, having been taken off guard.

“Aha!” he said with a satisfied gleam in his eye. “Just as I suspected. But had you completed freshman biology, you would have been able to answer that question.

“Now, who was the eighth avatar of Vishnu? Does a Paramecium beat its flagella? How do you find the torque of a rotary engine?” He fired questions at me like machine-gun bullets.

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” I said in exasperation.

“See,” he said, omnisciently. “Unless you have been to college, you simply cannot answer such questions. But had you taken the courses races and cultures of Arabia, India, and Lapland; microbiology; and automotive engineering, those questions would have been a snap.” And with that he snapped his toes.

“You see, Kent - “

“Keith,” I again prompted.

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“Oh, yes. Keith, all through life that sort of thing will happen to you. People will come up and ask you who composed the immortal musical work ‘Till Eulenspiegel’ or how many caliphs succeeded Mohammed or did Leakey discover the fossilized eohippus in northern or western Kenya or where can you get a writ of estoppel, and unless you have been to college, you will probably find yourself speechless. Can you now see the value of the liberal education we have been talking about?”

“Yes indeed. I only wish that I was not such a simpleton,” I responded.

“Now, now, Kip, don’t demean yourself in that manner,” he said, patting me on the head. “We all must begin somewhere. Let this be your beginning - the beginning of a continuous climb toward academic greatness. Now come back tomorrow, and we shall figure out your curriculum for the coming year.”

We shook hands, and I left his office and headed back across campus to the dorm. In my room I reviewed some of the things Professor Eberhardt had said. I also tried to find answers to some of the questions he had posed. One thing he said was painfully obvious. If his questions were any criteria of learning, I needed a healthy dose of liberal education. For education in our modern “technocratic” society is essential. A person must try to obtain knowledge and understanding and utilize his brain to its fullest capacity.

But as I discovered in the weeks and months that followed, there is a very real and present danger to the college student. And that danger is when education becomes an end in itself, when education is the only thing that occupies the

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student's mind, when education is the tune to which we dance, the central hub around which all life's experiences wheel.

I guess what I am really talking about is priorities. It's fine, as Professor Eberhardt suggested, to know who composed "Till Eulenspiegel" or how to find the torque of a rotary engine. But there is more to life. I learned that it is possible to become so involved with the business of getting an education that we neglect other, more-important things. The real danger comes when cramming for a test replaces Bible study, when chem-lab crowds out prayer, when our vision of Christ is eclipsed by visions of what education can make us.

Christianity says for us to go ahead and get that education. Get involved with the study program, the basketball league, the Saturday-night dates, the whole bit. But remember that no matter what happens at college, the Lord is still coming. That's the really important thing.

It's just that I remember what happened to me during that first year at college. I hit campus with new ends (shoes), new threads (clothes), new dividers in my notebook. I was all psyched up. Ready to go. I started off "gung ho" every morning with personal devotions, or at least prayer. But the year wore on.

All too soon it was December, and I let my study of God's Word slack off. I was buried under back assignments. I found myself studying for history quizzes in the class period before. I'd skip classes and ask a friend to take notes. Then it was March.

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There was no time for personal devotions any more. My program was too heavy. Weeks of Prayer wore off like No-Doz. Religion was like a dozen LP's on the stereo that I heard over and over again. I dozed through morning worships in the dorm as the dean droned on in a monotone.

I mumbled a prayer or maybe didn't pray at all before hitting the sack. And I would stare up at the ceiling and think about the awful rut I was in until sleep would take me.

Grades? Oh, my GPA wasn't hurting. But I was. I wasn't making progress. I was just stumbling blindly along because my spiritual life was a downer. But when things were over and summer gave me a chance to reflect on the dizzy whirl that had been my freshman year, I asked myself if it had all been worth it.

I had to confess that my priorities needed reshuffling. I had to begin again to put first things first - and that meant Jesus Christ.

Look. I want to be clear in what I am saying. I certainly don't want to discourage any student from "getting it on" with the total college program. My point is this: If you have neglected God's Word as the result of your studies or spoken to one less person on the mall or prayed one less prayer, it hasn't been worth it.