

Reflective Essay



Letter to My Past Self: A Pastoral Reflective Seven Years After Graduation

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Dear Jon...

The day is April 25th. You've just come home from a full evening at the Bible College Graduation Banquet. By this time tomorrow night, you will no longer be just 'Jon Engler'. Instead, you'll be 'Jon Engler – Bachelor of Arts in Theology with a Music Major.'

What an achievement! Four years of long classes, ministry trips, and grueling bus commutes in -45 wind-chill have all led up to this special weekend. No more papers; no more exams; no more four-figure bills for tuition. You're free!

But you're also nervous – very nervous. Now that the challenge of Bible College is over, you're wondering about the next challenge: A challenge known as 'real life'. You're only 21 years old. Where do you go from here?

As you reflect on your impending post-college future, I want to give you some contrasts to consider. Contrast is a powerful tool to inspire intentionality in one's relationship with God and journey through ministry. Consider this example from Proverbs: "The inexperienced one believes anything, but the sensible one watches his steps" (Prov. 14:15, HSCB, emphasis added).

As I think about the contrasts in Proverbs, and about the contrasts I have witnessed between past college life and present ministry life, I want to share with you three 'ministry contrasts' that have had a deep impact on my own journey. Take these contrasts to heart, Jon. They will serve you well once your tassel is flipped...

Contrast #1: The Outer Spotlight vs. The Inner Substance

The past four years, Jon, you've been somewhat of an on-campus celebrity. You've always thrived in front of an audience, whether it's a megachurch crowd on a choir trip, or a few close friends in the student lounge. The attention is exhilarating...no, life-giving!

You live for the days when you get to MC an all-school event; or conduct a choir warm-up; or lead worship for 200 students in chapel, backed by an 'all-star' band that you've handpicked from the

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very best talent on campus. You don't know how you would ever survive without your self-built platform.

That's because your platform is an idol.

Your identity and security are fully invested in how many leadership opportunities you can snag from week to week. Your whole life revolves around looking to advance from one level of 'ministry stardom' to the next. You have milked your Bible College platform for every drop of validation you can squeeze out of it.

But come Monday, that platform will be gone.

Your musical 'reign' will be over. The students who used to "ooh" and "ahh" over your talent and charisma will inevitably leave your social circle, and the college will be filled in by new students who have never heard of you. Before long, the 'legend' of Jon Engler will be little more than another 1" x 2" thumbnail on a homogenous alumni photo board.

And what then?

Listen closely: You must never base your identity on the emotional drug of visible ministry. Rather, your identity must be founded in Christ. You must shed your love of the spotlight and prioritize the inner life of substance, consistency, and security that Christ alone can provide.

See Jon, the spotlight never stays fixed in one place. Just as quickly as it found you, it will one day abandon you on a whim, leaving you alone in the shadows.

Your college friends also will face this same post-college "struggle in the shadows". By God's grace, some of your friends will use this struggle to bolster their relationship with Jesus. They will allow Him to build new levels of substance, depth, and integrity into their lives. They will "seek to live a quiet life" with the sole goal of knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection – their former platform now counted as loss for His sake (1 Thess. 4:11; Phil. 3:7; HSCB).

For others, however, the loss of the college spotlight will reveal major spiritual fault lines. You will never suspect these students of one day abandoning Christ; some of them have even been your most admired role models. But despite the spiritual exuberance they show outwardly, these people are battling an inner war – a war that can stay hidden for only so long. Left alone to their own thoughts, and without a public platform to incentivize their spirituality, their relationship with God will ultimately suffocate.

Do not anchor your identity in the spotlight, Jon. Instead, anchor your identity in the substance of Christ. Challenge yourself: Does Christ reign supreme at the center of everything you are? Is He truly your Lord and Master? Or is He merely a token that you name-drop as needed to win people's admiration? How you wrestle through those questions will determine whether your faith is sustained or shattered in the shadows.

Contrast #2: The Spectacular Rush vs. The Steady Flow

Each week of the past eight semesters, Jon, you have had the privilege of a spoon-fed spiritual meal plan: Church on Sunday; main chapel on Tuesday; casual chapel on Thursday; and plenty of ministry trips, prayer times, and theology classes in-between. The spiritual climate at college is like Mom's home cooking: Always there to feed you, and easily taken for granted.

But once you leave home, you'll leave Mom's cooking, too. Your meals won't prepare themselves; you must take charge of your health and not settle for the drive-thru when you don't feel like cooking.

The same principle applies to your walk with Jesus. After four years of enjoying a prepackaged spiritual climate, the loss of that climate will hit you hard. No longer do you have the luxury of a Tuesday chapel to get your weekly scheduled spiritual high. Instead, your relationship with God now depends less on corporate ritual and more on individual ownership. You must now advance beyond 'presuming the spectacular rush' into 'pursuing the steady flow', choosing to worship, wait, and seek the Lord daily – regardless of whether you feel anything or not.

Jon, will you seek God at home the same way you sought Him in chapel? Will you worship with the same intensity and fervor that you did on those choir trips? Will you dive into the Bible of your own accord and not just for a theology paper?

Don't try to recreate the spiritual rush of yesterday's chapels. Instead, mature in the 'steady flow' of Christ's fellowship today – and God will give you a spiritual vitality that will last long after you leave Bible College.

Contrast #3: The Selfish Dream vs. The Sanctified Destiny

The Bible College Dream is an idealized four-year checklist that nearly every student wishes to attain to some degree (including you, Jon). The dream typically goes like this:

- 1st Year: Assert yourself out of the gate as a future ministry star. Strive to achieve that coveted 1st Year Rep spot on Student Council, and you'll be set up for the future.

Uber-hip clothes and a Hebrew tattoo will go a long way to increasing your chances.

- 2nd Year: Assuming you're available, get to work on your 'ring before spring' by dating one of the best-looking girls on campus. You'll know she's a committed Christian because she also attends Bible College (duh!) and always raises her hands in chapel (double duh!). She also has over 1,000 social media followers, so dating her will give you far more leverage than what you would have if you were an inferior, lower-tier single.

- 3rd Year: Use your 'campus-celebrity-status' to score a high-profile internship at a megachurch. This will bode well for your student council presidential campaign.

- 4th Year: Kick off your swansong as the Student Council President. Propose to your girlfriend during a hipster photoshoot. Graduate with a 4.0 GPA and get hired as a well-paid staff pastor at the megachurch where you did your internship. Mission accomplished! You have officially lived out the Bible College Dream!

On the surface, the Bible College Dream seems perfectly harmless. At its core, however, the Bible College Dream is just one more variant of the human dream. It's the idolatrous craving to acquire more opportunities, absorb more accolades, and ascend one more rung on the ladder of success – only to discover that the ladder is a hamster wheel in disguise. To chase the dream is to chase many dangers: delusion, isolation, cynicism, burnout, and ultimate resistance to the sanctified destiny that God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:10).

Jon, suppose I told you that seven years from now, you would find yourself still single, serving a small church in an obscure American town, in the middle of a turbulent pandemic. And what if I told

you that this revitalization project would be one of the most precious ministry assignments you've ever had in your life?

Truthfully, you might throw a temper tantrum...because you're still addicted to your dream. You're consumed with achieving your 'big break' and doing everything you can to avoid such an obscure scenario. You esteem yourself to be above that level of ministry – so much so that you don't even want to be ordained. You think that pursuing the dream of Christian 'stardom' will fulfill you, enliven you, and set you on a path to endless validation.

But you'll soon learn that your selfish dream is no match for the sanctified destiny that God wants you to discover.

Very soon, Jon, you will come across other people who are further 'ahead' in their dream. Their position on the ladder may appear enviable at first...but you will see and hear the price they had to pay to get there. Many of them had to sacrifice reputation, family, and even character to make it this far – which is not far at all in comparison to all the other 'hotshots' ahead of them.

At the same time that you see the emptiness of the selfish dream, you will also discover the joy of the sanctified destiny. God in His wisdom will set you up with some 'unimpressive' ministry opportunities – a missions trip one year, a ragtag Baptist youth camp the next year, and a small town ministry setting the year after that.

And in those obscure settings, Jon, you'll see God move in ways that you never thought you would see.

You'll minister at a foreign outpost where a clinically dead child was miraculously resurrected just weeks before your visit; you'll see a cynical camp bully be transformed literally overnight by the power of the Holy Spirit; and your dream to 'make it big' as a worship leader will be replaced by a newfound passion for church revitalization.

Jon, God wants to give you a holy destiny that far outshines your broken dreams. His destiny for you is not marred by your selfish thoughts and impure motives; rather, His destiny is a sanctified destiny, designed by your Creator, who has made you for His glory and equipped you fully for every assignment He will put in front of you.

But Jon, before that destiny can be realized, you must die to yourself, and surrender your dream to the words of Christ: "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25, HCSB, emphasis added).

Conclusion

Jon, I know you're feeling awfully anxious about graduation. You're really wrestling with these different contrasts that I've shared with you. 'How do I become unattached from the spotlight? How do I move on from the spiritual rush that I enjoyed every week for four years? And how painful will it be to give up my dream?'

Don't let these contrasts psych you out, Jon. Instead, just step back and realize that each contrast contains a common thread: Focus on Jesus.

Do you want to develop your inner substance? Focus on Jesus, even when the spotlight leaves you in obscurity.

Do you want to experience steady flow in your relationship with God? Focus on Jesus, no matter the spiritual highs and lows that you may or may not feel from day to day.

Do you want to live out God's sanctified destiny? Focus on Jesus, and don't be afraid to give up your own selfish dream for something gloriously better.

Your graduation is in less than 24 hours. Receive this exhortation from Hebrews as you leave college and enter the future:

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne" (Heb. 12:1-2).

Just a few hours left, Jon. Now turn out the light and rest well. You've got a big day tomorrow...