

## TWELVE TOES AND COUNTING: GLIMPSES OF COLLEGE-STUDENT LIFE AT THE MILLENNIUM

Over a period of fifteen semesters, I have asked students on the first day of class to tell me something about themselves that “you ordinarily wouldn’t reveal on a first date.” After asking them to write down their name, hometown, major, favorite movies, novels, television shows, career plans, and assuring them that none of this will affect their grades, I say, “Finally, I’d like for you to tell me something more revealing. Whether you brag or confess, describe or analyze, tell me something quirky that sets you apart from the pack, the covey, the herd, and most other students at Clemson; something that might even be unique. For example, one kid told me he had twelve toes; another’s feet resembled a hobbit’s; another’s loft had self-destructed with him in it, a future nurse had diapered more old men than children, and one kid had ‘been a byrd [sic?] in a past life.’ What you tell me can, of course, be more conventional like some public recognition, a scholarship, a personality trait, a physical attribute, an exotic travel destination, a family connection, indeed, anything that concretely or obliquely contributes to who and what you are.” Most students, and I’ve taught over a thousand in the last five years, tell me that they are the first in their family to attend college, that they were named Miss Congeniality in a Goose Creek beauty pageant, that their grandfather was a halfback here in the 40s, or that they “have a great sense of humor,” which is fine, but it’s not what I’m fishing for. I’m trolling for the epiphanic details like the hobbit’s feet, the compulsive’s “rainbow closet,” and the former “byrd” that are so sweet it would be a shame not to record them.

Inevitably, a few students at the start of every semester are experiencing a “major crisis”—that is, a radical change of heart concerning their course of study. Their successful uncles advised them when they were twelve to go into economics, and now they can’t bear the thought of another accounting course. Furthermore, their parents had cut up their credit cards between semesters when word came that their GPR had plummeted to 2.0, which is the equivalent these days of 8000 on the Dow-Jones. One career-conflicted student said that she was a political science major but had not registered to vote. A nursing major revealed that she hated needles. An electrical engineer confessed she was terrified of electricity. A tourism major said he’d “been all over but didn’t remember most of it.” More English majors than I care to recall have admitted that they dislike reading. This disconnect is probably why few students receive their degree in the major they declared as freshmen. And this is as it should be; it’s a lot easier to change majors than careers.

Often students, especially freshmen confident of their majors, are still basking in the glow of their high school successes. Said one, “I’ve never made below an ‘A’ in English—hint, hint.” Another bragged, “I maintained perfect attendance K through 12,” yet over the course of the semester he took all the cuts I permitted. He was a quick study. Another, who has me, an old Army brat, beat, wrote, “I’ve attended fifteen schools, and I’m a long way from finished.” (I attended fourteen.) Occasionally Clemson, South Carolina’s visibly-secular, land-grant university, gets a Roman Catholic kid who escaped from New Jersey. One such apostate wrote, “I survived twelve years of parochial school, but I still panic when I see a nun.” Since I always ask if any of my students are on scholarship, quite a few tell me that they are the recipient of a Piggly Wiggly Scholarship, or the Heavenly

Ham Scholarship, or the York County Scholarship for the Children of Peach Growers. I am often amazed at how narrow the recipient base must be for many of these financial awards. One student said he'd received a scholarship because he had a semi-functional colon. His friends dubbed him the winner of the "Half-Ass Scholarship," but I'll bet his debt-ridden parents didn't care what it was called.

It shouldn't be surprising that many students are homesick on the first day of class and take, therefore, the small opportunity I give them to commemorate their families: "I'm distantly related to Bonnie Parker and Blackbeard!" "My granddad is the only man to KO me." "My great, great grandfather was the mayor of Dublin." "My grandfather married Mel Brooks' sister." "Hoagie Carmichael is my 4th cousin." "I'm an African-American descendant of Alexander Hamilton." "My dad dated Elvis's first girl friend." "The thin Mama from the Mamas and the Papas held me when I was a baby." And, "My uncle owns a nightclub where Tom Petty, Billy Joel and the Rolling Stones once played," are typical. Distant and strained as they might be, most family references are positive, and it almost seems like students are grasping for connections as if they were empty life jackets floating away from the Titanic. One lonesome young lady said she had seven brothers and forty-one first cousins and not one of them attended Clemson. Another, a test-tube baby, was an only child but had grown accustomed to the solitude.

A small minority of family references, however, are negative: "My Dad's a butcher, and I'm a vegetarian." "My mother's dead, and I don't speak to my father." "My folks are members of the 'frozen chosen'—they're neo-Calvinist Presbyterians." "My grandfather had connections to the Chicago mob." [I assume that's negative; I chose not to inquire.] Another said, "My entire family looks and acts like farmers; I try not to." It's sad when eighteen year olds are so self-righteous they cannot appreciate the opportunity their folks have worked hard to give them. These parents and others like them know they are farmers or mill workers, and it would break their hearts to know their kids are ashamed of any part of them. My personal favorites are the grateful children who brag, "My parents are still married, and I love them for it." Or the twenty year old, who looks thirty, who quietly vows, "I'm the single parent of a three-year-old daughter, and I promise you she's not going through the hell I've been through." As much as I admire the impulses of this single mother, I also know how difficult it is to protect children from themselves.

Second only to the parents and often first in students' affections are the significant others that many openly confess they came to Clemson to meet. "It's raining men!" one woman exclaimed. Most students are happy with the person they're dating though several express implicit reservations: "I'm dating a Hooter's girl." [No reservations here!] "I'm dating a street chemist." "I'm dating a guy whose head hurts when he misses a Simpson episode." "I'm dating a city girl who thinks all snakes come in two pieces." "I'm dating a Mormon who disapproves of everything I do for fun." "I'm dating a McCoy—should I be worried?" And, "I'm dating a Polish boy whose first name is fifteen letters long, mostly consonants, and I haven't learned to spell it yet." Saddest are the adolescent lovelorn: "My parents had my marriage annulled when I was sixteen." "I'm a nineteen-year-old single mom." "I haven't had a boy friend in three years." And, "I have a girl friend that I met on the Internet, but she won't tell me where she lives. I sympathized, but she may have known something I didn't.

Just as college students may be separated from their boy friends and girl friends, so are they divorced from the pets they raised. Since the university doesn't allow animals in the dormitories, students are frequently homesick for those feathered and furry creatures they

left behind. "I have dog named Toto," said a girl from Kansas. "I have a pet wolf, and I miss him," wrote another. "My Quaker parrot can whistle the theme from Andy Griffith," wrote a kid from North Carolina. And, "I have a pet giraffe named Oscar, who's only six feet tall," said a tall, skinny freshman. When students move off campus, which Clemson permits them to do when they are sophomores, they often bring their pets along or buy new ones. "I live with three guys and fifty gerbils," wrote one free-spirited young lady. A small minority of students, however, are zoophobic. One such wrote that her roommate had a cat, but she was "terrified of the beast." Another confessed to a fear of aquariums without explaining whether it was the guppy-eating fish contained therein or the possibility of the glass breaking across the lower bunk that frightened her. I have no idea what one young man meant by, "I used to show sheep, but no one knew it." Did he show them at night or out of town and never told anyone about his hobby, or were the judges not paying attention?

Clemson is only thirty-five miles from the ragged nail hole of the Bible belt (Bob Jones University), so it is not surprising that many of our students are Christian fundamentalists. Typical of the comments that reflect student religious concerns are: "I read a lot of sermons." "I was baptized in the Georgia Dome by Billy Graham in front of 40,000 people." "I was called to the ministry at the age of twenty." "I was voted 'Most Christ-like' by my church youth group." And, "I don't believe in dinosaurs," said one kid who might have been a creationist or just opposed to science and the fossil record in general. He dropped the class before I could find out. A small number of Wiccans, Deists, and New Agers show up each semester vastly outnumbered by the Baptists but determined, nevertheless, to defend their beliefs. "I have a medieval Celtic soul," wrote one young lady who later submitted a superb essay on Stonehenge. She'd been raised in a commune in northern California where she learned to "self-medicate" herself with crystals and "herbs." A very small number of Clemson students haven't been touched by religion at all. I remember one woman telling me that she had never read any part of the Bible before, felt no guilt whatsoever at this lacuna in her education, and wanted "to have more than one husband, all famous actors or rock musicians." I gave her high marks for candor if not fidelity.

A sizeable percentage of students wear their accomplishments on their sleeve. Quite a few of these "badges" honor their cars and trucks, which are either gifts of their parents or purchased with the meager incomes of after-school jobs. One lucky student, however, wrote, "I won a Honda in a Pepsi Bottle-Cap Game!" Many choose to tell me of their driving skills or the absence thereof: "I've driven a car for three years but have never earned a license." A young man with NASCAR ambitions wrote, "I've never lost a race on the street and never received a speeding ticket either." Another was a bit more modest: "I've never received a speeding ticket though I deserved a few." One young lady admitted that she'd paid Clemson Parking Services more than \$1700 in fines over three years. As a consequence, she was banned from driving on campus until she graduated. I'm surprised by how many tell me of their wrecks: "I've been in thirteen auto accidents; two on the same day." "I've had two accidents, both in the commuter parking lot at Clemson." And, "I totaled two cars in two weeks. Fortunately, I'm fairly impervious to pain."

Physical prowess gives many of the young males something to brag about: "I can kick a football fifty yards." "I'm an ambidextrous ping pong player." "I jump from tall obstacles and return to write about it." "I kill wounded ducks by crushing their skulls in my teeth. It's a Louisiana thing." "I have hitchhikers' thumbs." "I can make my eyeballs

twitch by squeezing my abs.” And, “I can cross one eye without crossing the other.” As if to warn me, one cautioned, “My jaw comes out of joint when I yawn.” A wiry fellow, who apparently aspires to his own show on the Animal Planet channel, wrote, “I’ve been bitten by a snake four times and killed a possum with my bare hands.” A hulking fellow said, “I once carried five college-aged girls on my shoulders without compressing any vertebrae.” I’ll never forget the fellow who boasted, “I can do a good imitation of a Sumo wrestler.” I was expecting a defensive lineman, but the young fellow weighed less than Don Knotts in a Speedo and didn’t appear to know a barbell from a dumbbell.

Even in the occasional honors class, few students boast in writing at least of their academic accomplishments. Some, however, cannot resist: “I’m an autodidact.” “I have a 4.0 and intend to keep it.” “Some of my photographs have been exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington.” And, “I enjoy watching The Learning Channel.” However, Clemson students are usually modest when bragging: “I won a faux-Charlie-Chaplin Contest when I was six,” is fairly typical, or, “I’m weirdly normal,” or, “Though I made the President’s list last semester, I failed the entry exam at IHOP,” and, “I pay more in monthly bills than my parents do.” I wanted to tell him to lose his \$56 per month cell phone, but I thought that might be presumptuous.

Hand in hand with the academic boast is the guilty confession: one self-aware young man said that though he was his class valedictorian, “I don’t spell so good.” And another admitted that she’d made over \$600 in royalties on an Advanced Placement English paper she’d written three years earlier. Some term-paper web site had paid her \$250, and every time some student bought a copy of her essay, she received \$5.

It’s remarkable what some students are willing to talk about on the first day of the semester. Several students have told me, a total stranger (in most cases) old enough to be their grandfather, that they sleep naked or they’re still virgins. More surprising are those who admit right after I tell them how much I expect of them that they’re lazy or lack ambition! Representative are: “I seldom get up before 3 PM.” “I’m in a coma.” “I’ve been here almost six years and don’t want to leave.” And, “I’m a tenured senior and scared of growing up.” After these, I’m happy to contemplate a semester with the kid who tells me, “I can’t sit still” I trusted that meant he was curious and energetic, not a quivering bundle of omnidirectional protoplasm. I was wrong. But having said that, despite all those Ritalin-addicted kids in the public schools I’ve read about, I’ve yet to have a really serious discipline problem in over thirty years of college teaching. One girl balanced her checkbook right under my nose, and another took a cell-phone call in the back of the class, but the worst rudeness is the occasional kid who leaves unannounced in the middle of class—just fishes up his book bag and departs.

Many students these days have a tattoo or body piercing, and few are shy about discussing it: “I have a gold lightning bolt through each nipple,” said one gay fellow. “I have three tattoos—a rose, a barbed-wire arm band, and a skull,” said a woman who’d spent a lot of time on a motorcycle. “I have a \$1000 worth of tattoos,” said one shy fellow who wore long sleeves on the warmest days. “I have eleven piercings, but I’m still a virgin,” said a junior chastely. A few, however, are having second thoughts about their investments: “I have two tattoos only one of which I regret.” And some are frankly terrified their parents will discover the permanent marks they have had needled beneath their skin: “I have three tattoos, and my daddy doesn’t know about any of them.”

Food issues are quite common among college women. The following were all written by young females: “I’m the only woman in the world who hates chocolate.” “I can’t get

through the day without a Diet Coke.” “I wish I didn’t love pepperoni pizza!” “I gained fifteen pounds last semester!” “I only eat with plastic—metal makes me gain weight.” And, “I got addicted to chocolate trying to quit smoking.” Occasionally males too will speak of food but usually without the guilt: “I can eat a whole IHOP waffle in one bite.” “I love bacon!” “I once drank a full container of maple syrup at the Awful Waffle.” “Ben and Jerry’s Phish rocks.” And, “I eat a lot; in fact, I’m hungry right now.”

Despite the over and under indulgences, I’m always surprised at how many serious health problems late adolescents have. Hernia and appendix operations, scoped knees, abortions, breast augmentations and reductions, asthma, diabetes, mononucleosis, depression, anxiety attacks, attempted suicide, even kidney stones may fill up their dance cards before they are twenty-one. One kid said that after a heat stroke the previous summer he could not smell or taste anything. Another said he’d lost much of his hearing when he fell from a cliff he was scaling. Risky behavior is second nature to most adolescents, of course, which accounts for their willingness to sample controlled substances like Ecstasy, crack cocaine, and angel dust. Aware of the legal consequences, however, very few talk openly about their experiments, but one student defiantly said, “I got fired from a grocery back home for failing a drug test. Legalize pot!” A few weeks later, the same fellow came to the office to make up a test; when he left, there were marijuana seeds, leaves, and stems scattered across the desk top. Was he careless with his stash, or was he leaving me a vegetable bribe? I never found out. His essay read like something composed aboard the Beatles’ yellow submarine: “I was borne in Sugar Tits, Tennessee to a wooman named Butercup who still calls me Swetcheks.” I had no choice but to fail the paper, and he soon dropped the class.

In closing, let me sample the contributions of a single sophomore literature class to disabuse anyone of the notion if I haven’t already done so that the modern college classroom is not already “diverse.” In the front row sits, “I’m a horandle speler,” beside, “I want to be the Oprah Winfrey of the Carolinas,” beside, “I hate all bare feet except my own,” beside “I can chug three beers in nine seconds,” beside, “My granddaddy owns Candle, Alaska,” and, “I milk goats and write poems, but not at the same time.” The second row is comprised of: “I have the biggest room on campus,” beside, “I’m a Tri-Delt pledge,” beside, “I’ve lost as many as twenty straight hands of blackjack,” beside, “I can eat an entire bag of double-stuff Oreos,” beside, “I have a bad habit of humming all the time,” and, “When I eat a banana, I wear the sticker on my forehead.” In the third row are: “I sleep between Garfield sheets with a Pound Puppy named Whiskers,” beside, “My daddy’s going to buy me a car,” beside, “I’d like to patton [patent?] my own slang,” beside, “My daddy’s a Baptist minister, and I’m gay,” beside, “We live in a geodesic dome built by my ex-hippy mom and dad,” and, “Once I sore [saw?] a blimp.” In the fourth row are, “I’ve driven 12,000 miles in the past four months for no apparent reason,” beside, “I’ve saved my sister twice from suicide,” beside, “My friends call me ‘the apostle,’” beside, “I can shotgun a six-pack of beer at one sitting,” and, “I’m a stall mucker.” And closing out the back row are, “I milk cows six hours a day,” beside, “I’m a minor-league mascot back home,” beside, “Some think me insane,” beside, “I won \$10,000 in a radio contest,” beside, “You taught my parents in 1974,” and, “I wear a kilt and shoot at people for fun on the weekends.” No, this wasn’t a Scottish drive-by killer; he was a young man of Scotch-Irish extraction whose hobby is Revolutionary War re-enactments.

And people wonder why I don’t want to retire.