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Hell of a Life

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Professor Norris

HON 481-002

Baby We'll Live a Hell of a Life

There is a sense of unique community that I feel when I am on this campus. Despite the raging rivers of difference between me and some of my fellow classmates, I am them and they are me. We all know struggle, we all know pain. We all know papers due at midnight, we all know exams in the morning. We all know because we are all students, and we are all human. And there is one thing that you cannot take from me that I would not more willingly give, but humanity is within us all. No matter how far you get in life; how big your house, how expensive your car, all of our graves will be the same size. No matter what clothes you wore, what music you listened to, what parties you attended or what house you slept in during vacation, we are more similar than we know. We are so unbelievably complex, yet there are many truths we find self-evident if we take the time to find a mirror. These are some of the things I have discovered throughout this semester, and throughout my life. This class has helped synthesize my revelations, by pointing out how we tell our stories, and what our stories say about us.

I looked back on my notes from day one in this class, and I saw the list we made on our hopes for this colloquium. Mine included, apart from a good grade, 'a concise way to write,' and to 'really delve into myself and learn more about spiritual auto-biography.' I have definitely learned a whole lot about myself this year. As I said before, coming back from abroad was a little daunting, but I think I handled it well. And I have had some huge disclosures. For instance, maybe I did not like this school, but perhaps this school liked me. Maybe it needed me. Not to put myself at the center of this academic narrative, but maybe I am here for a reason. And just

coming to that understanding has helped me accept copious amounts of events and feelings. It has helped me come to terms with the f-word. The Future.

And maybe I am not ready for this world. There are days when lights are too bright, the noises too loud, days too long and sleep is deprived. Sometimes the loneliness still finds me. I thought I had escaped it, I thought I had graduated from hide-and-seek with my demons to the stage where I am okay with coping; maybe not. Maybe facing your fears is something we do not want to do but something we have to do. Maybe the future is daunting, and maybe that is okay, and I am still learning that. The unknown terrifies me beyond comprehension. I am not okay with unreliable floors or soft ground. It's like starting college all over again. And to be honest, I am scared. I know I have worked hard here, I know my efforts were valid, my intent polite, but this map I roll out is blank, and it shortens my breath. I have only just discovered who I am, and now I am asked to enter the world? Like THE world? That is scary, but it is comforting to know I am in this with so many other people. All of my graduating class will face this together, and that gives me hope.

The people who shape you do so silently and loudly. Humans, and humanity altogether, is such a crazy concept. Let's talk about people. We pick up their little habits and words, their mannerisms. We try so hard to find things in common. We love and we hate. Like we said in class, *maybe the person who annoys you the most is the one you should think of in the most spiritual terms, because they are the one teaching you a lesson.* There is so much we can learn from one another. We are so alike, yet we are so undeniably distinct. We all laugh and cry in the same language. We make amazing things. It is a fact that Emily Dickinson once wrote: "You know there is no account of her death in the Bible, and why am not I Eve?" (Letters of EMILY DICKINSON 1846). This is unbelievably inspiring for me, and for all of us. To be a saint is to be

yourself, but learning who you are may involve times of imitation. This course has created more questions than answers for me, but that is ok. I have learned so much more in depth about Christianity and spirituality in general. This was educational theology on a personal level. Learning about the saints one at a time, accompanied by your book discovering your own theology, and outside pieces really complemented one another.

One thing I always try to do is revel at everything (rather Whitman-esque, I know). So, when I found out about Annie Dillard's notion of the present, that we are never in fact *waiting* we are simply *in this moment* I loved it even more. It is time for us to live where we are, not in some distant future or in the memories of the past, but now. Saint Ignatius of Loyola personifies this present-ness. When asked what he would do if the Pope were to disband his new order, he said he would need fifteen minutes alone, and then he would be ok. He understood temporality. That is not to say he had no grip on the eternity of God's life, but he understood that even this earth is just a house, and heaven is home.

Things kind of worked out this year. Reading Dave Eggers helped me learn that using humor as protection is okay. We all fight our darkness; why not laugh at it? So many people bail me out of tough days. The kindness and passion of my teachers. The understanding of my roommates. The patience of my friends. I have come to appreciate it so much. And some of the poets we read really struck a chord with me. Allen Ginsberg was my favorite. That visceral, raw description. It gives me goosebumps, so authentic, so human. Students tend to think of poetry as unattainable, outside the realm of their college-age mind. But the poets we read were much more relatable. Poetry has an effect on my thinking, and how I remember things. We spoke plenty about memory in this class, stemming from when Jesus said, *do this in memory of me*, to Augustine's thoughts on memory and his reflections on childhood, to James Martin recalling the

role of saints in his life. Memory is such a strange thing, because when we see or hear or live something, we can never un-see, un-hear, or un-live it. How peculiar a permanency.

There is a great movie called *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. To sum it up, two people fall in love, then out of it, and elect to clinically remove every memory of the other from their brain (science has progressed to the point this is possible). The movie chronicles their falling in, and subsequently out, of love, and each one receiving the operation. The protagonist Joel, decides (unfortunately mid-procedure) that he no longer wants to forget Clementine, that she helped him grow, and learn about himself. This leads to a crazy montage of Joel's memories. I will not tell you how it ends, though I highly recommend it, but I am sure you know enough about the human condition, and the repetition of history to figure it out. What I am trying to say is that memory is so incredibly important. If we had no memory, we would be a bunch of babies, wandering this earth with no place to go, no people to see, no ambition, no light. But thank God for memory! Thank Him for the apple in Eden, and the ocean Noah faced, and the sea Moses crossed, the dream Joseph had, and infant Mary conceived. Because of all of these things, and infinitely more, we have memory, and we can remember. We realize so much in retrospect, I think it was Soren Kierkegaard who said "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." This is where all that restlessness and tension derives from. That frustration from knowing it will all work itself out, and it will all make sense in the future, though right now it is chaos. Knowing that \ is comforting, not knowing if it is looming or shining is not.

Maybe there is not one overarching truth to which we all aspire. Maybe there isn't one big rule we all have to acknowledge. Maybe there are lots of little truths, each with their own distinctions and composite parts that we unearth every day. There is no right answer. They tell you to 'think outside the box,' but maybe there is no box. I have learned to be okay with this. I

have come to terms with where I am and who I am. And though it may have taken me a bit longer and a bit farther than others, that is okay. There are pieces that I have gained from each reading we had. Augustine's restlessness. Mother Teresa's darkness, and mental anguish. Dorothy Day's resilience. Therese's courage. The Ugandan martyrs' strength. Peter's weakness. Mary's trust. They are all traits to be learned and kept. Find serenity in your way. I use humor to deflect bullets of reality. It is safe to say that college is a battleground. Maybe like Napoleon versus Russia. I still try to run away from things, but when I run now, it is not as frantic. I am more at ease with myself now. I have come to realize that bad days happen, and while I cannot explain them, they will pass. It is just a bad day, not a bad life. And there are things that can help. Like hot chocolate. Like the voice of singer Ed Sheeran. Like Tumblr. Like friends. Let yourself turn the page of your book, and wake up tomorrow with the light bright in your eyes, and your soul strengthened by the night. To end, I will quote Dorothy Day:

“We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community. It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on” (Day 285).