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Our University – Struggle

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Our University – Struggle

The struggles of a university are not the subject of these thoughts. It is too easy. They are many, not unique, frequently self-inflicted, and responsive to environment. Universities are members of a family of similar institutions. The nature of a family is in great measure determined by the character of the individuals that make it up. The branches may come from the same root; they will take on shape and character based on their relationship to the whole, orientation to the forces of nature, and other variables independent of the root but guided by it.

All universities are defined by struggle.

The greatest universities are those that address the struggle of ideas, science, technology, art, people, communities, and morality so that growth and adaptation are achieved by responding to the circumstances of learning and the diverse paths of study.

Universities provoke struggle in their members and simultaneously support them, not for any perverse pleasure that spectatorship of struggle provides but because out of the veins of struggle comes the most complete joy and benefit of learning.

Campuses are beginning to look like four star resorts. Student housing photographs like a posh hotel, with swimming pools, climbing walls, running trails, horseback riding, barbecue terraces, outdoor gardens and dining areas and gourmet coffee. These amenities do not ensure excellent educational experiences.

Struggle alone guarantees educational excellence.

The struggles of import to college students are battles of mind and heart as the intellect is tuned: of faith and its relationship to a way of seeing the world, of social issues and professional insight, of work and rest, right and wrong. These are the struggles that mark the student, and set the cornerstone for a person's life.

Many dimensions of struggle are clarified in early adolescence to be sure, but others nag at us for all our days. The university experience is the launching point for the balance of life.

My friend reminded me the other day of the character of Sisyphus in Greek mythology that was doomed to repeat the same task over and over again. He rolled a rock up a hill only to have it roll back down. Endlessly this poor guy rolls the stone up and gravity brings it back down. For Sisyphus, the repetitive work was punishment for a life poorly lived.

So many aspects of our emotional and intellectual lives are replays of precisely the same rock rolling that Sisyphus had to deal with, not punishment for anything other than the sin of ignorance, unthankfully a common ailment, thankfully a pardonable transgression.

Correctly choreographed ignorance is the framework of discovery, and a significant portion of that exercise is rock rolling.

Learning.

The distance from ignorance to discovery is a remarkably short trip, usually on a road traveled in pain from one perspective, and joy from the other, determined in whole by our view of struggle.

And that is what the university is for. To help people shape their own struggle. In the midst of skill and technique, workplace productivity and job opportunity, big ideas and critical thought, eternal issues of life can be given lift between emotional adolescence and adulthood, through university experiences, which set a life trajectory.

At our university, when we roll that rock and help others learn to do it, we should count it all as joy.

Healthy struggle is the guardian of accomplishment.