**THAT**

**COLLEGE**

**BOOK**

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**Everything** ***Nobody*** **Told Us About Life After High School**

(The Sample Edition)

by Timothy Snyder

THIS BLANK PAGE PUBLISHING

**#THATCOLLEGEBOOK**

**Introduction:**

**The Road Unfortunately Taken**

With each bump in the pavement, my rusting Ford Taurus shook violently. The mechanic said I needed new shocks and tie rods. I couldn’t afford new shocks *or* tie rods. So I just had to deal with it.

Pressing hard on the gas, I watched as the orange needle on my dash went well over the speed limit. But speeding wasn’t going to change my fate.

I was going to be late. I was going to be late for my college graduation rehearsal.

*Why can’t it be raining,* I thought. If it were raining, I’d at least have some reason to give for being late. A horrific traffic accident might have worked too. Anything that was out of my control. Instead, the sky was cloudless, and the roads were clear.

Always late with little excuse; story of my life.

As I continued to push the limits of my rattling car, the ringtone on my phone sounded off beside me. I stole a glance from the screen. *Unknown caller*. I put my focus back on the road. I never answered calls from strangers. If it was important, they’d leave a message. That was my motto. Maybe it was just another failed excuse.

 A few blocks later, and my message light started blinking. I had a voicemail. Now I was curious. Taking the steering wheel in my left hand, I reached for my little red LG phone. A couple of button presses, and I was listening to my mystery caller’s message.

“Hey Timothy,” said an unfamiliar male voice, “it’s Panera Bread in Shakopee. I was just calling to let you know we received your application.”

The caller just went from having my curiosity to having my full attention. I gripped the steering wheel tight in anticipation. Could my days of unemployment finally be at an end?

“You have great experience, and we would love to have you work with us.”

I held my breath as I tried to remember what it was like to have regular income. After more than a year of odd jobs, rejected applications, and fragile finances, sweet, consistent paychecks were coming my way.

“Unfortunately…”

I felt my heart sink down into my stomach, dragging all my hopes and dreams down with it.

“…we just hired three new people and don’t have any open positions. We usually have a new position open every couple of months. If something comes up, we’ll let you know right away. Thanks Timothy. Once again, we’d love to have you. We just don’t need anyone right now.”

The phone fell from my hand, slipping into the abyss that lies between the driver’s seat and the center console. I was 23 years old, driving to my college graduation rehearsal, a mere 5 days away from receiving a Bachelor’s degree, and I just got rejected for an entry level position at Panera Bread.

*Panera.*

*Freaking.*

*Bread.*

I had applied to a job where 90% of my competition was high school students, and I lost. Most likely *to* high school students. Possibly middle-aged house wives. I guess it didn’t matter that I had actual restaurant experience (not to mention, you know, a college degree). Like the phone that had just fallen from my hands, I felt as though I had been dropped out of life, slipping into some in-between space.

I no longer cared about being late to rehearsal. I wasn’t concerned with how I was going to get my phone out of the crevice it fell into. I simply wondered how I ended up in this current predicament.

See, I grew up with this mental checklist of life: be born, go to school, graduate from school, go to college, graduate from college, start a career, get married, have a few kids, retire, die. In my understanding, that’s just how life was, and if I followed that checklist line by line, I would win the game of life, achieve the American dream, find Waldo and all that jazz.

All I had to do was hit the checkpoints as they arose, like a linear round of Whack-a-Mole. They had started off so easy. It's not like I remember my birth. I suppose it would be pretty traumatic if anyone did. Thinking about it now, I completely understand why parents made up that whole “stork” thing. Regardless of how I was brought into this world, I saw my birth as the free-space on life’s bingo card.

Next up was school. I never had a problem with school. On my first day of kindergarten, there was a boy in the corner crying. "I miss my mommy," he said between weeping gasps. Maybe school was hard for him, but for me, it was smooth sailing from day one. Oh sure, I went to the principal's office a few times, had my heart broken here and there, and the sixth grade as a whole was sort of awful, but besides that, I had lots of friends, I was involved in everything, and I made all sorts of memories.

And once I made it through high school, I got to experience step three: graduation.

Imagine all of your friends throwing parties at the exact same time. There is punch, cake, sandwiches, those shiny little confetti pieces, and you get money from people you don't even know. It kind of makes the whole school process worth it. Best of all, I was free. As I was handed my diploma, and stood there, a high school graduate, I realized the rest of my life was before me. It was time to choose a college which would lead to a career and all the other wonderful things on my life list. The problem was I had to choose.

Not whether or not I went to college. I *had to* go to college lest I become a jobless bum. At least, that’s what I thought. So I had to decide where I would be going. Unfortunately, decision making isn’t my strongest skill.

In a panic, I quickly chose a college and went. It was fun, exciting, and completely wrong for me. The next year, I would choose a different college and end up sticking with it. Four years later, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing.

Unfortunately, this is where my whole "life plan" train went completely off track, flipped on its side, crashed through a small town, and destroyed everything in its path. The only guarantee in life is that there are no guarantees in life. I hate clichés, but this one is particularly true. I knew what I wanted to be while I was in college, and I thought I had a job lined up that could lead me to that next step. Apparently, it didn't matter. I graduated jobless and flat broke with school loans knocking at my door like Death himself. I felt crippled, scared, and lost, not so different from my kindergarten classmate crying for his mommy.

All I could do was sit there and ask myself “How did I get here?”

That was back in 2010, and I can happily say that I am sitting in a much different position. You see, today I'm doing almost exactly what I planned on doing after college. My life is far from perfect, but I stand victorious-ish. I’m a college graduate with a career semi-relevant to what I went to college for, and I spend my free time chasing down the rest of my dreams and doing things that I love doing.

From what I understand, this is a bit of a rarity these days.

But despite my happier mood, better standing, and best efforts, I’m still paying for past missteps. Thanks to some poor choices, I racked up some serious debt. I also lost out on a good chunk of time I will never get back. The two years that followed my graduation were some of the darkest, most difficult years of my life. It’s not just that they were challenging. I was completely lost, stuck in a hole with no visible way of getting out.

Life after college broke me, and to be transparent, I’m still working on reassembling the pieces.

In many ways, I feel like I should have been where I am now about 4-5 years ago. That’s just how it is sometimes, and I’ve accepted that I can’t change the past. But maybe I can help someone change their future. If I could survive and become the man I set out to be, surely someone could take what I've learned and do it better.

That’s how the world advances. The future changes when you avoid the mistakes of the past.

When I graduated from college broke, jobless, and directionless, it wasn't because the economy was bad or because my parents weren't rich. I mean, sure, a better economy and rich parents wouldn’t have hurt, but most of the blame lays on decisions that I made. It wasn't that I made one major wrong decision. The problem was that I made a series of poor, seemingly insignificant choices going back as far as high school that added up to disastrous results.

In a lot of cases, I made those decisions because I simply didn’t know better. Often, I was just doing what I thought you were supposed to do.

I’ve spent a lot of time over the past few years talking with friends, family, and strangers who have experience all sorts of post-high school problems, and we kept coming back to the same questions:

Why didn't we know about THIS fact?

What made us think THAT would happen?

What if we would have gone THERE instead?

Why didn’t someone tell me not to do THESE things?

Too many of us had bought into this idea that life is a one-way, single lane road where choice is an illusion, and everything will magically work itself out. We realized all too late that there were so many things that nobody told us about life after high school.

And I thought to myself *there should be a book about this*.

So, in an attempt to legitimize my English degree, I sat down to write one. Initially, it was a book about everything I wish that someone would have told *me* before I went and committed my life to this thing called college. While that’s still the heart of the book, it has grown into something more. It’s become the story of people who unexpectedly slipped into the gap between high school and adulthood, why it happened, and what might have prevented it.

A lot of people read books by famous people who have done famous things in a hope to mimic their actions and become famous themselves. This book is kind of the opposite. I'm not famous nor are any of the people featured here. Most of the stories you’re about to read are ones of epic failure. Hopefully by reading them you can learn from them, avoid them, and become one of those super famous people who write how-to-succeed-in-life books. If that happens, I promise to read your book in return. Just make sure to thank me in the opening notes. Throw some royalties my way too, while you’re at it.

Who is this book for? It's for people who are going to go to college, skipping college, or are in college right now. It’s for people who know absolutely nothing about college and people who think they know everything about life after high school. It's for parents whose children may or may not go to college. It's for those who are searching and trying to figure out how they can get to that next point on the grand checklist of life.

And for people who have already been through college or have their career, feel free to read it anyway. This isn't a book of facts, figures, and statistics. It's a book of stories and experiences shared across a generation of people who were told to go to college *first*, and ask questions *later*.

I hope you learn something. I hope in some small way, it helps you make better decisions so that the struggles you face in life are better than the struggles I had to deal with the past few years. I also hope you find this book to be funny. That way, if it sucks, you can say “Well, that book was awful, but at least it made me smile.”

Feel free to laugh at my personal pain. I do...when I'm not crying from it. If you're reading this book, and you aren't a personal friend or family member who had to read it out of obligation, then my trials and errors weren't for nothing. Hopefully this book didn't become a smashing success after I died a lonely, homeless death. I always felt sorry for authors who experienced that. I guess this book isn't for me though. It's for you, whoever you may be.

Enjoy. If you read something, and say to yourself, “Dang Tim, that stuff there is on point,” feel free to tweet it, Facebook it, tumble it, tumble dry it, and whatever else you crazy kids do these days. Just throw #thatcollegebook at the end, and we’re good to go.

Oh, and if I'm dead, shed a tear for me please.

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# Part I



To Go to College or Not to Go to College…

Is That Even a Question?

**#THATCOLLEGEBOOK**

**Chapter 1:**

**Don’t Buy into the Hype**

“College isn’t for everyone.”

Ever notice how that’s typically said in a negative context? It’s as if they’re really saying “Being successful isn’t for everyone” or to be blunter, “Only really dumb, really poor, or really athletic people skip college.” Does *not* going to college mean that you’re some uneducated bum who’s going to die in the same town they were born in?

Of course not.

Besides, almost everyone used to die in the same town they were birthed in, and they were great people. Granted, women used to smoke during pregnancy and baby cribs used to be painted with lead based paint, but the point I’m failing to make here is this: there is nothing wrong with not going to college.

I was raised with this idea that college was an inevitability. Like two plus two equaling four, high school graduation led to college attendance. It was never *if* I go to college. It was always *when* I go to college. I wish someone would have made it clear that college was my choice, and that a good life could still be had without stepping foot into a college classroom.

People can have great success without going to college. No, I’m not talking about rockstars or actors. I’m talking about normal people in normal jobs. People who *chose* not to go to college.

If you’re going to go that route though, you’re going to have to be committed. You’re going to have to work hard. You’re going to have to know what you want to do and where you want to be.

In other words, you have to have a plan.

**Joey’s Story**

Joey is a former roommate of mine. He’s also a ginger. Not that it matters. I just want to help you get a visualization. Despite being 2.5 years younger than me and not having any college education, Joey is arguably more successful than myself. Why doesn’t he write a book then? Well, writing isn’t Joey’s strong suit. But what he lacks in rhetorical skills, he makes up for with a dedicated work ethic.

Back in high school, Joey wanted a job so he could make some spending money. See, Joey needed to impress the ladies, and girls don’t like broke, jobless boys unless they’re musicians. Joey was not a musician. So, he started working at a popular restaurant chain. The occupation was nothing fancy, but Joey discovered he was pretty good at it. Soon, he found himself promoted.

As high school graduation approached, Joey considered the college route. The idea seemed attractive. All of his friends were heading to college. There were plenty of fun times to be had. The problem was, Joey had no idea what he would get a degree in. Truth was, he had never cared much for school. Meanwhile, his job offered him the promise of future promotions. After graduating, Joey took a leap of faith and decided to work full time at his current job.

Four years after starting that job, Joey became a General Manager of his own store. He was 22 at the time. The job came with salary pay, paid vacation, the ability to write his own schedule, and quite a bit of free food. Oh, and he had zero college debt. Instead of spending hours learning about subjects he didn’t care about, Joey learned how to build a team, manage inventory, delegate finances, and make a wide variety of food and beverage items. I can tell you first hand that he enjoys his job and takes pride in what he does. And he still has room for further promotion, should he choose to go that route.

By comparison, when I was 22 years old, I was still in college, racking up the last few thousand dollars of my debt. I did have a job at the time. Sort of. It was for a commercial moving company. The available hours were all over the place, and I got paid $10 an hour. Most of the time, we’d go in at 6am and move really heavy things. I did not enjoy it. I did not take pride in it. And there was no road for advancement. I made just enough to cover my rent. Meanwhile, Joey was making a living for himself.

That’s not to say it’s all about money and job security. This wouldn’t be a success story if deep down, Joey hated his job. But he doesn’t. Overall, he’s enjoyed it very much. Will it be what he does for the rest of his life? Only time will tell. I do know that, should he decide to pursue something else, his manager experience can help greatly in landing him a job elsewhere.

Despite what I thought for a long time, there are still plenty of “real jobs” out there that can be attained without a college degree. They’re not some made up fantasy like the Easter Bunny or fat-free pizza. They exist. You just need to find them and work hard to earn them. It’s also important that you actually *want* to do them. Like Joey’s own position, many of these jobs start off as part time or entry level. A lot of companies promote from within, meaning almost everyone has to start at the ground level regardless of education or experience.

I’ve worked a lot of jobs in my day, and with each one of them, I never stopped to think of where they might lead. I never thought how I’d feel if I was still working there 3 or 4 years from now. All I cared about was making some money to hold me over.

It might seem weird to think about when you’re looking for a part time job, but it never hurts to consider advancement potential when you’re applying somewhere. While considering a job, ask yourself this: If you’re still working there three or four years from now, will you have a better position? Will you be making more money? Will you still find a sense of purpose or fulfillment in your work?

These are all questions you might want to seriously consider.

**The Safe Start**

Community college: it’s where you go if you’re too dumb to get into a real school, right?

*Wrong.*

Okay, sure, some people do go to community college to bring up their poor grades, but many choose to go there for a variety of other reasons. If you want a four-year degree, a masters, or a doctorate, are you going to get it at a community college? Generally, no. But you can still start there. As you probably know, there are certain college classes that everyone has to take (yes, unfortunately mathematics is one of them). Community college might be just the place to get these classes out of the way while you figure out what you want to do with your life.

Depending on where you end up going to college, taking some general classes at a community college could save you quite a bit of money. Think of it like Nyquil cold medicine vs. the store-brand variant. Nyquil might be a little more effective, but at the end of the day, both will knock you unconscious, allowing you to sleep without sneezing and coughing. The difference is, Nyquil is about $2 more per bottle.

If you want to go to a four-year school eventually but you’re looking to save yourself some money, there is absolutely nothing wrong with looking into community college as a place to start.

In fact, you can take community college classes while you’re enrolled at another college or university. Sadly, no one told me this until my last semester of college. It was spring 2010. Sunrays danced along sparse, white clouds in the sky. A cool breeze pushed against my overly-spiked hair, making me look like the male lead of a Japanese anime. I had just crossed 12th St in Minneapolis when I saw my friend Corey getting into his car.

“Hey Corey,” I said, “Where are you off to?”

“Oh, I got Spanish down at Normandale,” said Corey.

“You’re not a student here anymore?” I asked, quite surprised.

“No, I am.”

“But…Normandale.”

“Yeah,” he said as if I just said something really stupid, “That’s where I’m taking Spanish.”

“You’re taking college within college?”

“I guess.”

“That’s legal?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“Why is it legal?”

“No, why are you taking it there?”

“Because their Spanish class is $1000 cheaper.”

“Why does no one tell me these things!?” I shouted as I ran away in shame.

This news probably would have hurt a little less had I not been currently enrolled in our school’s more expensive Spanish class. I didn’t even like Spanish. Had I known I could take college classes outside of my school while remaining enrolled in that school, I probably would have taken a different language altogether. I would have saved $1000 and been well on my way to learning Japanese. Japanese, I say! The people in that class would have appreciated my hair so much.

It wasn’t really until that happened that I realized there might be more to the community college scene than I ever gave it credit for. Maybe I should have been a little more like my brother and sister.

**A Tale of Two Siblings**

In the town of Sheldon, Iowa, there is a lovely little community college called NCC. I know this because this is where I grew up. Sheldon is pretty small (i.e. 5000 people) and doesn't have much in it. To better paint the picture, we just got a McDonalds a couple of years ago, and it was a big deal. Yet, despite being barely populated farm country, Sheldon has a community college. Why? Because like rain in Seattle or hipsters in Minneapolis, Minnesota, community colleges are everywhere.

Availability is one of the reasons why community colleges are so convenient, and convenience is the exact reason why my brother and sister both attended NCC.

Being the oldest of us siblings, my brother was the first to head off to college. It was a pretty big deal. The first baby bird leaving the nest. Only he didn't really leave. Upon graduating from high school, my brother Tony signed up for classes at NCC. It wasn't his endgame strategy, but for the moment it made a lot of sense. His classes would be incredibly cheap, the school was practically in our backyard, and he could keep his current job whilst freeloading off of our parents.

“Are you glad you went to community college?” I asked my brother as I secretly planned to use his response in this book.

“Yeah, I guess so,” he responded. That was the end of the conversation.

My brother: a man of few words. Allow me to elaborate for him. He has nothing to regret about going to community college for a year. He saved money while figuring out where he wanted to go, and what he wanted to do with his life. When he left for a four-year college the next year, he seemed quite sure that was the right decision.

In fact, it worked out so well for him that my older sister followed in his footsteps the following year. Her story is almost the exact same. After a year of community college, she ended up going to the same college as my brother. It was there that she earned her degree *and* met her husband. What a happy ending, huh? Had she been afraid of going to community college, who knows where she would have ended up?

Probably living in a van down by the Floyd River in Sheldon, Iowa.

So why didn't I go to community college like my brother and sister? For a long time, I said it was because it simply wasn’t the right choice for me. Truth is, I didn’t want to be one of those people who stayed around after college. I wanted to venture out and start a new life. In this case, I think that worked out just fine. When it comes to big life decisions, there isn’t always a *right* and *wrong* choice.

Then again, sometimes there is.

**The Point of No Return**

The summer air was thick with humidity as black clouds began to swell and blanket the sky. Thunder crackled, declaring that rain was coming. As the first few droplets pattered against the windshield of the Volkswagen Jetta I sat inside of, I quickly rolled my window up. Though I was protected from the inevitable downpour, a different storm was brewing inside the car. In the driver's seat next to me sat my friend Rachel.

Even with the sun lost in darkness behind the clouds above, it wasn't hard to see the tears forming in her eyes.

The rain was now beating away against the aluminum roof, demanding that its presence be known. The change in moisture caused the windows to fog over, leaving us nearly blind to the maelstrom outside. We weren't going anywhere anytime soon. Rachel turned her head away from me, but I could see the confusion in the edges of her face.

"I just wish I could go back," she said.

My heart sank. That’s exactly how I had felt the past year. Longing to return to a simpler time where I could change my poor decisions. It was a desire that had wreaked havoc over my mind. I couldn't go back. I couldn’t reverse time and unmake my choices. And this was the pain in Rachel's voice. You see, Rachel is one of the most responsible people I know. Like most things in her life, she had her future all planned out. As her high school graduation approached, she was set on going to a community college called Normandale. It was close, it was cheap, and it would provide all of the classes she needed for now. Unfortunately, not everyone felt the same.

Rachel had a teacher whose opinion was very important to her. This teacher strongly urged her to go to a "real school", saying that community college would hold her back. Right before she committed to going to Normandale, she changed her mind and applied for a university instead. Being a respectable student, she was accepted in no time. In the moment, it seemed like a good choice to go to this university. Three years later, it was obvious that it had been the wrong choice.

"I knew it wasn't right," she said while we were stuck in the car. "I knew it then just like I know it now. I should have gone to Normandale. There was nothing stopping me. I made the wrong decision."

Rachel's teacher had great intentions. He saw a lot of potential in Rachel and wanted the best for her. The problem was, the best thing for Rachel just might have been community college. Attending Normandale for a few semesters wouldn't have decreased her future options whatsoever. Having three-fourths of a degree at a private university practically extinguished them. Instead of being empowered by her education, Rachel became burdened by it.

Having that much of a degree completed at one specific private school is very hard to transfer. As for leaving it unfinished, that's a waste of a lot of money. On a résumé, an unfinished degree isn't much different from no degree at all.

On that night when Rachel and I were stuck in her car, I wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay. I wanted to remind her of the awesome person she was. But what Rachel really needed at that moment was to simply let it all out. To admit that she had made a mistake. Had she done it sooner, there might have been more options available than simply soldiering on.

There will come points in your life where you have to make hard decisions. In those times, there will be people around you whom you love and respect that will give you their opinion. Some of them will be nice and subtle about it. Others will be very blunt and brash. All of them will mean well.

But that doesn’t mean they’ll be right.

They could be. It’s possible that they’re seeing something you are blinded to because you’re too close to the situation or because you lack confidence in yourself. They could also be completely wrong because they’re not you. They don’t carry your calling. They can’t experience the things you feel deep down inside.

When those moments come, if you know without question what the right choice is, you have to have the courage to make the call. After all, you’re the one who has to bear the consequences.

**Community Colleges are Like Dogs (In a Good Way)**

I’m friends with this married couple. Actually, I’m friends with a lot of married couples. You reach this point in your life when at least three-fourths of your friends are engaged or married. Depending on your romantic life, you’ll either be really excited or a bit depressed.

Possibly both at the same time.

Anyway, the particular couple I’m talking about are my friends Roy and Elissa. Like many loving married couples, they had dreams of a family filled with little children running around. Being quite young and new to the world of careers, mortgages, and bills upon bills, they knew that the first years of their marriage weren’t a time for children. But that desire to raise and care for something remained. So what did they do?

They bought a dog.

Their dog was named River and she was a black, lion-sized creature who enjoyed tackling people and chewing on their feet. What I’m saying is River was quite a handful that required Roy and Elissa to be more responsible. Still, as crazy as she was, River was not a baby. Compared to babies, dogs are much cheaper, easier to train, and sometimes, it’s perfectly okay to tie them up outside and ignore them for a bit. That doesn’t really fly with babies. Roy and Elissa knew they ultimately wanted to have a baby, but they were smart enough to realize they weren’t ready.

So instead, they took a small step that helped prepare them for the ultimate goal ahead.

Just so we’re clear, I’m not saying you should run out and adopt a puppy or make a baby. I’m saying that college is a big step that takes considerable time and commitment and not everyone is ready for that straight out of high school. If you know you want to go to college, but you’re not sure if you’re ready, community college might be the perfect solution for you. Decisions can’t be unmade, but sometimes, you can delay them for a little bit.

If you’re ready for the full college experience, go for it. If you’re not, take it slow.

For so much of my life, I was told to take things slow. Whether I was behind the wheel or pursuing a pretty girl, ‘taking it slow’ was generally advised as the best course of action. But when it came to college, for whatever reason, that changed, and I was basically told to jump in head first and learn how to swim after. So just in case you’ve received similar advice, I’m here to say there is nothing wrong with taking it slow.

Pretend you’re a gentleman from the 1800s and college is a classy lady. Court her. Meet her parents. Weigh the pros and cons of your arrangement with her. And when the time is right, the stars align, and everything is agreed upon, take her hand in holy matrimony.

Or something like that…

**Where’s the Cake?**

For the past few decades, there has been an idea placed in the minds of almost every high school student. It’s as if we’ve all been incepted. The idea is that if you work hard and go through college, you will be rewarded with a plethora of jobs to choose from once you graduate. Many of my friends and I went to college thinking that once it ended, there was to be a grand party that acts as a kick start to our adult lives. This party will have all of our friends and family cheering us on, and sitting on a table is a great big cake with our names written on it.

Let me break this to you: the cake is a lie.

Stop me if you’ve heard this one. “If you go to college, you will get a great paying job upon graduating that you will take great pride in.” I’ve heard teachers say that. I’ve heard parents say that. I think I’ve even heard a president or two say it. This is a more accurate version of that statement: “If you go to college, you *might* get a *decent* paying job upon graduating that you’re not completely embarrassed by. Oh, and you’ll only get that after sending out endless résumés and cover letters. You might need an internship or two as well.”

Doesn’t sound as sexy, does it?

Sure, some people get lucky when they graduate. They have great connections or rich uncles who made a fortune in the wild-west days of the internet, and they get a nice, cush job right out of the gates. But for so many college graduates, after years of working their butt off in classes to make the grade, they have to work their butt off just to get a passable job. Post-grad life is a big game, and the game tends to be both rigged and not a lot of fun. Be prepared. Oh, and that party I mentioned earlier. That doesn’t happen either.

A couple years ago, my good friend Alex graduated from college. He needed a new place to live, and I had a spare bedroom waiting to be filled so he moved in the day of his graduation. I had been gone that weekend, leaving Alex and his parents access to the house in my absence. I returned a few days later to find Alex sitting alone in his new bedroom.

“What’s up, broseph?” I asked, completely forgetting that I told myself I would stop using the word *broseph.*

“Nothing actually,” he said. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Oh,” I paused, looking over the mostly unpacked room. “All moved in?”

“Yep. Didn’t really have much.”

“Parents gone?”

“Yeah, they left right after moving me in.”

I smirked. “Let me guess, you had your graduation ceremony, went out to dinner, parents moved you in, left, and you sat here by yourself for the last couple days, feeling lonely and wondering what the crap you’re doing with your life.”

Alex nodded. “How’d you know?”

“That’s exactly how my graduation went.”

“Well, you’re right. I’ve been sitting in here like an idiot. Everyone was either busy or gone.”

“Welcome to post-college life. It’s not all they say it is.”

“Yeah man,” he said, “it actually kind of sucks.”

Quick question: which is featured more often in movies? High school graduation or college graduation? The answer is high school graduation. Do you know why that is? It’s because high school graduations are considerably more exciting than college graduations. College ceremonies are longer, less familiar, and there’s a good chance you won’t be graduating with your friends. Once it’s over, your diploma is shipped out, and you’re left to fend for yourself.

When I graduated from college, I went to my ceremony, ate dinner with my parents, and then they took off. There was no big after-party. I received one congratulatory letter. When my degree came in the mail, I set it up on my dresser where it proceeded to collect dust like a champ. Even a year or two afterwards, I would have people ask when I was going to graduate from college. Was I supposed to send announcements out to everyone? I’m sorry, I was too busy not getting a job.

I apologize if I’m sounding bitter or depressing. It’s not my intention. I just want to be straight with you; college graduations tend to be underwhelming. If you’re saying to yourself, “I’m going to go to college because when I graduate, everything is going to be perfect and fantastical as I ride across dream-filled rainbows on my fire-breathing unicorn named Cornelius”, you’re setting yourself up for disappointment.

I think this best describes it:

Growing up, my life was an island. Everything I knew, everything I was, was on the island. When high school graduation came, it was like moving from inland out to the beach of my island. The beach was awesome and the horizon seemed to stretch on forever.

I’d sit there, and I’d think *I wonder what’s beyond this island?*

Then college graduation came, and that was like moving from the beach out into the middle of the ocean. Suddenly, life was sink or swim. I couldn’t just go back to the island that I knew. I couldn’t even see the shore. Some days, I questioned if there was ever an island in the first place.

Meanwhile, sharks were circling, ready to devour me. It felt as if I could be swallowed up at any moment, disappearing into the watery abyss forever.

That is exactly the scenario I would like to help people avoid. It’s why I am writing this book in the first place. No one wants to be lost at sea. No one wants to feel like life moved on without them. And while you could argue that this type of situation is inevitable in life, it at least deserves to be caused by something grander than just “finishing college”.

**The Boy that God Forgot About**

Facebook is a great place to keep in touch with friends and family. It’s not a great place for serious conversations. That doesn’t mean they don’t still happen. I was sitting comfortably on my roommate’s suede couch, laptop in front me when a chat window popped up. It was my friend Chris. Things started off light and breezy. He asked how I was. I lied and said everything was great. This was during the two-year post-college darkness period. I didn’t want to get too serious on the Facebook, so I decided not to mention that my life felt meaningless. Chris, on the other hand, had other plans in mind….

**Chris:** Tim, can I ask you a serious question?

**Timothy:** Sure.

**Chris:** I'm warning you, it's a big one.

**Timothy:** Is it about the deeper themes and ideas of the Battlestar Galactica finale?

**Chris:** No, it’s about the deeper themes and ideas of my life.

**Timothy:** Oh…

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Timothy:** Well, now I'm a little nervous, but we're standing too close to not dance at this point.

**Chris:** K.I know it sounds juvenile at best, but...why do I feel like God forgot about me?

**Timothy:** You're asking why you feel like God forgot about you?

**Chris:** Precisely! I feel like He straight up forgot about me.

**Timothy:** Could you maybe elaborate a little bit?

And elaborate he did. This isn’t a conversation of faith or whether you believe there is a God. It’s about feeling lost. Cheated, even. My friend Chris worked hard in college. He studied, held a job, poured himself into an internship, and produced a very solid senior project. Basically, he did everything right. Surely everything would come together after graduation, right?

Not so much.

Since he was living in an on-campus apartment, he had to move out soon after graduation. His part time job's hours weren't ideal and the work environment was becoming increasingly less fulfilling. As for the internship, the hope that it would turn into a permanent position was quickly diminishing. In the span of a month, years of plans came undone and Chris's world had become completely foreign to him. To make things worse, most of his college friends were slipping away, leaving him with few people to confide in. Oh, and he went through a rather serious breakup right in the middle of it all.

"I feel like I'm living an edited life. Some short, undeveloped outline of what it should have been," Chris had said to me.

Much like myself, Chris had lived his college days with a certain amount of blind optimism, the idea that everything would fall into place like a rigged game of connect four. Then reality happened. The blinders were removed and for the first time, Chris glimpsed life’s raw, unfinished center.

**Handling the Truth**

For both Chris and myself (and many others), post-college living was the first time the bumpers were taken off life’s bowling lane. We weren’t going into graduate studies, leaving us without an automatic next step. We no longer had our parents to provide for us or teachers to teach us.

It wasn’t until I graduated from college that I realized how much control I had over my life, and ironically, it left me feeling incredibly helpless.

Put simply, the post college transition can be the hardest, and most painful season of life that a young person has ever faced up to that point. It doesn't relent. Author Phillip K. Dick once said “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” I spent most of college (and even some of high school) putting off reality as much as possible. For a while, I had myself convinced that I had succeeded. But all I had done was delay the inevitable. The longer you put off the realities of life, the harder they will hit you. So what do you do?

You accept them and step towards something greater.

Like metal is forged in fire, between an anvil and a hammer, the struggles of your early adulthood will shape you into the person you will be for the rest of your life. The sooner you accept your responsibilities, the less painful it's going to be. Moving on from college and starting my real life has been exciting. It's been an adventure filled with all sorts of twists and turns. But so much of it felt like I was playing catch-up. Generally, it’s better to form a battle plan before the battle. That would be the smart thing to do, anyway.

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