

**in\_ dependence**

j hart



For the happily nerdy kids who, graduating from high school, realize they're not so smart.

For the jocks who get to college and notice they are relatively small.

For the beautiful girls who have always wished they were prettier.

For the popular kids who suddenly recognize that no one is paying attention.

**For** my family, friends, and other encouraging influences.

**For** Megan.

I can read well because my parents read to me... and if I couldn't read well, I doubt if I'd be able to write. Thank you, mom and dad.

Further thanks go to Mrs. Grimm who taught me English could be fun, Mr. Brown who showed me it wasn't as easy as I thought, Mrs. Summers who gave me faith in my writing, and the others who remind me to stand up for my opinion – but not without thinking it over.

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## START

*I'm considering writing a book. Again. For some reason it's one of those ideas that sounds really good as I'm falling asleep. But then I wake up the next morning and remind myself how stupid trying to write a book would be. I do have some confidence in my abilities, however. So I'm going to try to regularly write in this journal, just in case. I'd hate if I decided a book was a good idea, but by then had forgotten details of what I wanted to write about. Plus, journaling is supposed to be good for your soul, or something like that.*

Dated 9/4/2001. I wrote these and some other thoughts on the first page of a twelve-cent, 70-page notebook. Had there not been two blank spiralbounds sitting in the bottom drawer of my desk, serving no purpose but as spares should my others spontaneously combust, who knows (spontaneous combustion is always a fear for paper covered with things like calculus notes). If it were a challenge to write stuff down, I might have ignored all the chapter topics and other ideas that kept sneaking into my head.

Maybe it was God; maybe He gave me some writing talent with plans to one day shouting in the back of my mind, "Write a book!" Oftentimes when it was dark, I was tired, and it was time to crawl into bed, that thought would come up. Finally I decided to run with it, and pulled an empty notebook out of the drawer.

Over the summer I had considered the idea, even took the time to type a vague outline. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized how pointless it would be. I was going to write a book about the summer before college, and the fears of an eighteen-year old preparing for possibly the biggest change of his life. Its one promise was its uniqueness – after all, what teenager has the desire or time to write a book?

It sounded like a decent idea sometimes, but not often enough to convince me. The school I would be heading off to at summer's end started classes early, so I'd never been hired for a summer job. Had I chosen to follow through, I probably would've had the time to write *something*. Except the central question always remained – time to write what? So I did nothing.

The first days of September I was reflecting during my blurry pre-shower, early morning minutes. I had become a college student, largely taking care of myself. I had adjusted to the move away from home, I was fine, and the worst was over. Move-in was two weeks past and classes had started more than a week ago. What blessings, being assigned a roommate who was cool and professors who were only marginally intimidating!

Sadly, several friends from home (not to be sexist, but the ones having trouble were girls) frequently complained of homesickness, trouble meeting people, and so on. Nobody wants their friends to be unhappy, and I tried to think how I might help out. Having moved so early, I was in a position to offer suggestions and support. I attempted to make my friends feel better and convince them everything would be ok.

Did I succeed? Maybe a little. Whether they listened or not, I do think I gave decent advice for once. If I was talking to someone who missed her family, I would try to remind her that thousands of people were going through the same adjustments, right there on the same campus. My favorite advice – I was proud of it because it made sense and seemed helpful – was, "Just don't worry about it. Keep busy, meet as many people as you can, and you won't have time to feel homesick. By the time you stop to think about it, you'll be comfortable and you'll have people to talk to."

As far as learning to cope, that's all there is to it. But there's more to life than feeling comfortable and having a couple people to hang out with. It's a whole different ballpark making close friends, getting through classes, and taking care of yourself on a long term basis. As someone who used to worry way too much, I can identify with people spending their entire summer stressed about the move to school.

As someone who still worries more than I should, I can identify with people who might struggle to get through their first semester without going crazy. I was determined not to lose it, and I have a source of strength that won't wimp out when I do. God supports me every day, and there is no doubt in my mind that the Christian path I'm trying to follow is better than any alternative.

Can I write about this? My mildly original, bright and shiny idea assumes that I can. I was scared about going away to school. I worried about meeting people and living in a completely new environment, and would love to help even one person be less afraid.

However, considerable difficulty lies in being open about my experiences without incriminating the people around me. I hope to find a workable balance between honesty and privacy. My own privacy is of little concern, but naturally I'll have to refrain from using many peoples' names since I haven't told anyone I'm writing a book.

I'm going to try to tackle some difficult issues, and I can only pray that my point of view is interesting. My goal is to reach high-schoolers nervous about heading off to school and – more importantly – freshmen trying to adjust. College life is a big part of American culture and, like anything, there are stupid assumptions that go along with it. There are many traps for uncertain new students to fall into, and I've seen how easily we can find ourselves in one. Maybe, just maybe, I can get to someone who woke up today sick of the lies and looking for hope. Here goes nothing...

## 2. Get You In

If you want to go to college, I think it's safe to say the first step is getting in. Sure it is, but how do you get accepted? How do you decide where you want to go before it's too late? I narrowed down my options right off the bat. As tempting as it might sound to head to Coral Gables, Florida or Washington, D.C. for college, options like this never appealed to me much.

I hate being in a car for more than a couple hours, and my family doesn't really have the money to shuttle me back and forth from a distant school several times a year with plane tickets costing a few hundred bucks a pop. Plus, someone might 'bust a cap' in me if I went to school in a big city...and I bet sooner or later, Florida people get sick of perfect weather.

Complement the distance factor with the fact that it costs anywhere between twenty and fifty dollars just to *apply* at most schools, and it made sense I should only consider a few universities. I live relatively near the western border of my state, but since out-of-state enrollment is much more expensive I decided to look at in-state schools. The limit this put on my options was minor.

No matter where you are from, there are bound to be a number of colleges in your state (unless you live in Rhode Island where there's only physical space for three and a half buildings...or in Montana, home of approximately 42 residents). And a majority of the contiguous United States – my home state included – have more respectable universities than one would even have time to consider.

Because I'm blessed with a considerable amount of intelligence (sorry, don't know how to keep this from sounding arrogant), I didn't have to worry about being accepted to whatever school I might choose. I got good grades in high school without all that much effort, and have always tested well. Thanks to a GPA near 3.9, strong ACT and SAT scores, and a class rank in the top 2%, I probably could have applied to Yale or Harvard with some confidence. I'm absolutely not brilliant though, so I never considered the ivy leagues. I'd much rather enjoy studying at a great school than torture myself studying at a REALLY great school.

Despite my grades, supportive parents, and planning, I fumbled the ball on the big decision. I'd narrowed my options down to two schools – both in my home state, similar in cost. College Number 1 was an hour and a half from home; College Number 2 was twice as far. I planned to study management information systems, which is basically "business for internet geeks," and College 1 had a great business school.

Easy choice, right? But I received my scholarship packet from Number 2 first. They offered me around \$3500 a year in scholarships and, because I'd heard College 1 was stingy, I sent in the housing agreement. I was set to go, prepared to settle for my second choice. Uh-oh...my housing deposit was in the mail...my future was headed for the ground.

The scholarship offer from College 1 arrived just in time. To my amazement, the University would give me \$5000 a year to attend! I opened my eyes, realized how stupid it was choosing a school that was *almost* what I wanted, and felt God sweep away any doubts as to where I belonged. The deadline was not past, so my parents called College 2 for a refund and I sent in the acceptance forms for Number 1.

Fumble recovered by the offense! Some of the better advice I've received came from my high school government teacher, who told us to figure out where we wanted to go to college and then go there – no matter what. I guess I kind of ignored him...thank God the University is not as cheap with scholarships as I'd thought!

This, then, is the advice I pass on to anyone preparing for college: don't settle. Don't settle for decent grades if you know you could get better ones. Don't settle for an average score on a standardized test if you think taking it again might yield better results. Most importantly, when it comes time to decide where you want to go to school DO NOT settle for your second choice.

If it means taking out \$20,000 in loans, you're better off going somewhere you'll be happy and paying your debts later than you would be wondering how much sweeter things could have been. These are four big years we're talking about – that's a long time to be only semi-content. Look to God for direction, ask adults for help, and do everything in your power to make the right choice the first time around.

### 3. A Trial Run

I won't lie: moving to college was one of the scariest experiences I've faced. No matter how excited you are about living on your own, it's bound to be a big adjustment. As high school raced to an end there was no way to know how I'd handle the move, so I tried to pray about it frequently and worry about it little. Then I received a crash course on college life over the summer, months before move-in. I was fortunate to get the experience – though I didn't think so at the time.

University policy required students to attend one of three summer orientation dates. The idea was for incoming freshmen to spend two days meeting peers, getting acquainted with campus, and registering for classes. The first day included a tour, seminars, and small group discussion. We were separated from our parents, who had their own meetings about financial aid, adjusting to the absence of children, and more financial aid. The afternoon could be summed up as 'bearable.' Boring, but alright because the seminars weren't terribly long and I talked to a couple kids in my group.

Registration was scheduled for the next day, following a lecture in the morning about *how* to register (exciting stuff, eh?). Since we live more than an hour away, my parents and I had little choice but to stay in town overnight. The University strongly suggested that students sleep in a dorm room, and gave parents the option of booking one for themselves. My parents, sensible adults with no desire to pay money for a night in a dorm, got a room at the hotel on the outskirts of town. Just because I had to stay in a dorm didn't mean they should.

This was fine with me until I started talking to other students and found out most of them were staying at the hotel. Suddenly, I was angry with myself and my parents for believing the mailing that said students needed to stay in dorms. Mom and dad would have a nice room, a pool and probably a hot tub, on a little overnight vacation. I would have a tiny room and a community shower and some weirdo for a roommate.

That first day I had later meetings than my parents did, so by 3:00 there was no reason for them to stay on campus any longer. I tried to weasel them into taking me when they left, but they refused. The University had charged over a hundred bucks for me to stay in a stupid dorm room, which dad said would be good for me anyway. I felt closer to bawling than I had in a couple years as they drove away, leaving me on the steps of a strange building, holding my bag packed with shower stuff and clothes for the next morning.

I turned around and trudged inside, into the large conference room where the entire orientation group had started the day. It was now being used for academic advising, and seemed a ghost town compared to earlier. I needed to find out whether a foreign language was required for my major, so I waited in line to talk with a French-sounding old guy at a makeshift information desk. I told him my major, and he told me the best news I'd heard all day. As a business student, the only language I needed was English. I like English. Here ended the good news.

On the other side of the room was a huge line of people waiting to talk to math advisers. I picked up a ticket, numbered 83. I sat for fifteen minutes, then overheard that they were on number 40-something. After a few more minutes I decided there was no sense waiting for advice I'd ignore.

I knew that the adviser would tell me I needed a semester of pre-calc before taking business-required calculus (I'd scored below 50% on the online placement test). I was not going to take more math than necessary and was not in the mood for being told that I should. I crumpled the number into a pocket of my shorts, picked up my bag, and headed out.

I felt like such a loser, lugging around my overnight bag. Nobody else had things to haul around. Heck, hardly anyone else was *around* at all by that time in the afternoon. Most of the kids were skipping out on the last seminar and had gone with their parents to the hotel.

But soon I was glad the place had become semi-deserted, cause I had no idea where I was going. Even armed with a map it took an embarrassing degree of wandering to locate the building I'd been stuck in for the night (would now be a good time to mention that I've since become a University tour guide?).

I might collapse if I didn't get rid of my bag. I finally cornered the correct building, signed in, and took a key. I went down the hall and found my room – there were two plastic "gift" bags hanging from the doorknob. I pulled

off the top one and went in... the room was so small I could barely walk between the beds. The desks were pushed off in the corners, the closets jutted out into the room, and (of course) there was no air conditioner in the window.

My roommate was nowhere to be seen. This was a relief, because somehow I *knew* he was going to be strange. I dropped my bag on one of the beds and sat next to it, flipping through the sack of leaflets I'd grabbed on my way in the door. Most of the contents were junk, local advertisers trying to get a head start on the freshmen. I found a handful of decent coupons; everything else went in the trash.

There was nothing to do until dinner an hour and a half later. I sighed a little, stood, and went back into the hall. Several guys were standing around, and since I was alone I introduced myself. They weren't especially friendly but they were funny, so for lack of options I decided to leech on into their group.

We went to dinner and it was nice having someone to eat with, even though they knew each other and I was clearly the odd man out. The schedule after dinner included one last seminar and then a party next to the dorm. I couldn't quite see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I knew it was getting closer.

I followed the new guys around like a lonely penguin. Once the final meeting ended, my temporary friends headed for the bars to see if their fake IDs would work. I had no desire to go with them and still less of an urge to get in trouble before move-in, so I turned back. Although I didn't think they would care, I mumbled something about going to check out the University's party. I'm not sure they noticed.

This time I had no trouble finding my dorm – there were spotlights on and a small crowd for the party. The three-minute walk alone in the dark gave me time to think... My afternoon had been crappy but negotiable, and in about twelve hours I'd be home. The sidewalk I was treading was strange to me, but would be familiar by autumn's end. Soon I would know the names of the buildings, and may even have friends to visit inside those buildings. I looked forward to being comfortable at school, knowing God would be with me through the rough parts.

I got back to the dorm and was unimpressed by the party. Several of the resident advisers were dancing and acting goofy, trying desperately to make things fun. I hate dancing and didn't recognize anyone, so I got a cup of pop and a few pretzels. After milling around for a few minutes I'd had enough, but felt like a loser for going to bed so early. Determined to be a *little* outgoing, I said hi to a random girl and introduced myself. We talked for maybe thirty seconds before she walked away without a word.

Her attitude was the last straw – I would put up with no more from one stupid day. I went inside and back to my room, which was empty but for my bag and another on the floor to verify my roommate's existence. The hall was abandoned, which presented a golden opportunity for me to take my shower.

I usually shower in the morning, but was willing to make an exception. Community restrooms were one of the most frightening aspects of college for me, and I wanted to take my first shower at the University without being seen naked, getting attacked, or both. There were girls in the same building and I was on the first floor, a combination I didn't like.

Yep, community bathrooms and showers made me quite a bit nervous, and I didn't feel like starting the next day surrounded by naked strangers. I dug my towel, soap, and shampoo out from my bag and went down the hall. The restroom was, as I had hoped, deserted. The showers, of which there were only four, were separated by thin plastic curtains. Getting this over with was definitely a good idea.

When I returned to my room it was still unoccupied. I flipped through some of the handouts that I'd accumulated over the course of the day, and was about to go to bed when my roommate showed up. It was only 11:00, so after we introduced ourselves I talked with him a bit. He was friendly, although he seemed a little... off. A short while later he left for the restroom, and I went to bed.

My roommate did the same when he got back, except apparently believed that 'bedtime' meant 'loud music time.' Although he had a portable CD player he saw no reason to wear the headphones. So, there I was at nearly midnight with some psycho in bed two feet away, cranking heavy metal while I'm trying to sleep.

Thankfully, after a few minutes he put his headphones on his **head**. I could have cheered, but the silence was short-lived. My roommate's day must have been better than mine, because it was 12:30 and all of a sudden he was

in the sort of mood you'd expect from a twelve-year-old girl at a slumber party. He started chatting away and though I barely responded it took him awhile to notice.

He shared with me a theory that he allegedly made up but probably heard on late night TV: imagine that your brain is like a herd of buffalo, and the stupid brain cells are the slow critters of the herd. If this were the case, then simple application of the knowledge that alcohol kills brain cells would lead to the conclusion that when drinking, you thin the herd by killing the slowest – and dumbest – cells. Therefore, the more heavily you drink, the smarter you will become.

I laughed, and it must have sounded encouraging because he went on to inform me it was perfectly safe to drive while high. He knew, because he had “driven completely baked” before. I didn't know if he was serious or trying to be funny but either way I ignored him until finally he stopped talking. At last I fell asleep. The next morning, we ate breakfast together and then went our separate ways. I wonder if he made a continued habit of driving stoned – I haven't seen the guy since.

My morning felt like a continuation of the less-than-Kodak-moment day before. I wandered around campus, struggling to correctly read my map and get wherever the heck I was supposed to be going. After snoozing through a talk on how to register for courses, I followed the crowd to a building across campus and filled out forms with the classes I wanted to take. After having my sheet checked by an adviser, I went to another building to sign on to the network and get down to business. Since I'm a computer nerd I was logged in, registered, and out in about five minutes.

Finally I was finished, and on the way home could whine to my parents about the torment they'd forced me to suffer. Back in the car, I was relieved to have a bad experience over with and almost happy it had turned out the way it did. I felt less anxious about leaving for school, knowing I could survive even if I got a weird roommate like the one I had for registration. Other scary preparation had been taken care of, too: my class schedule was set, I lived through using a community shower, and I got nice and familiar with having no idea where I was.

#### 4. Relocation

Sometimes, forcing your feelings into the back of your head and ignoring your fear pays off. Alright, I've only found one time that it worked but it paid off *really well*. What's a guy to do, sitting in the family minivan as it nears the strange new place that will be his home for the next several months? I knew that I was powerless, and as my favorite radio station died out in the speakers I felt a pang of terror.

The butterflies in my stomach were doing circus stunts... I felt nearly nauseous. I fought them down and distracted myself with passing scenery and shallow conversation with dad. What the heck was my problem? A hundred different people must have told me the move was scary but worth the challenge. Somehow I had thought if I admitted my fear ahead of time, I could sidestep it altogether.

I had been wrong. I wanted dad to turn back so I could stay at my safe, comfortable house forever with my big bedroom and pool and limited responsibilities. I wanted to sit around and play videogames with my little sisters while my parents made the big decisions. At the same time I wished I could have come to school by myself and moved into my room alone. At least then I wouldn't have to say goodbye; at least then I wouldn't have my family with me as reminders of everything I was leaving behind at home.

Maybe that would have been better once I got to campus. But then again, it only would have pushed the challenging scene back a couple hours to the point when I would have left home all alone (plus it wouldn't have been smart cause I didn't know how to get to school). Also I would have sweated to death trying to carry all my junk without my family's help. So, we did things the logical way and the car ride was difficult.

Earlier in the summer the University had mailed us contact information for our assigned roommates, but I hate using the phone and I put off making the call. Fortunately, my roommate-to-be was more normal and friendly than I. One night over the summer I'd received a call from the total stranger with whom I would be living for an entire school year.

We'd talked about music and other interests, and got along well enough that the important stuff was temporarily forgotten. By the time move-in day rolled around the two of us had good impressions of each other and had worked out who would supply the carpet, whose TV we would use, whether we needed a microwave, etc. It helped to know the details were covered...but nothing could take away my nervousness as we entered town and I pulled out my campus map.

So I found myself that August afternoon lugging my belongings through a maintenance entrance to my dorm, a rear door that was the easiest way in from the parking spot we miraculously found. We had been forced to circle the block amidst heavy traffic, but that was fine because searching for a space created a welcome distraction. Everywhere I looked there were kids saying goodbye to their parents, which did not make the process any easier.

Once my arms were loaded and my parents and sisters were following me carrying stuff, the worst was over. Through the entrance we went, where I was directed to a row of tables for sign-in. I awkwardly autographed a form, got my room key and a pile of paperwork to never read, and from there it was up the stairs to find my new place of residence.

The building was a zoo, with families separating and freshmen meeting their new peers and fathers carrying vacated computer boxes. Signs on the wall kept us from getting lost more than once on the way to my room, which we found in a short stretch of hallway at one end of the building. As I honed in on the door with the right number, one of the guys talking in an adjacent doorway asked for my name.

He was my roommate. He introduced himself and we shook hands as my family and I squeezed through the door to unload my things. His parents had dropped him off earlier that morning and laid the carpet, positioned the desks, and bunked the beds. My new roommate was polite, seemed cool, and helped as I got unpacked and situated.

The room was so tiny that it looked like only one arrangement of the furniture would work, so without delay we unpacked my sweet new computer. Hooking it up when my parents left would prove an excellent diversion. Several trips down to the car, profuse sweating in the Midwestern autumn heat, and twenty minutes later we were finished.

I locked my bike to the rack in front of the building, dad loaded the empty packing boxes back into the car, and then my family went home. We said goodbye and I had little desire for tears, felt just a tiny bit scared as they left; I made a point of being too busy fidgeting with power cords and introducing myself to guys in the corridor and putting my clothes away to become horrified.

Having a good roommate made the whole move-in and adjustment process much easier. Because we got along, I always had someone to hang out with and talk to those first two weeks. During that time we ate most of our meals together and were usually around each other when neither of us had class or errands to run. I can barely imagine how rough it might have been to get through the first weeks if I'd been assigned a disagreeable roommate.

But God had my back; He made sure I got somebody who was easy to talk to and enjoyable to hang out with, and who made the transition relatively painless. Much less of a factor but still helpful, it was good that the University scheduled hours of fun-filled entertainment for its 3500 new students.

At first glance, the mandatory list of freshman seminars and activities set up for our first weekend looked annoying – high school had already taught us that both of the above are typically boring and pointless. Even the social events that were meant to be exciting seemed forced and cheesy. I'm not super shy but do poorly without a friend or two around to work with, so I was nervous about meeting people.

Unlike most of the new students, I had no one from my hometown to hang out with. Hardly a person had heard of the village on my mailing address, and very few suburban kids could relate to a farm boy from way out in the boonies. So, when everyone went to the concert our first night on campus I tagged along with my roommate and his friends. I mingled a little at the concert but only a very small "little." It was less than encouraging.

The next morning I biked into town for my books and went to almost all of my assigned meetings. After a forever-long seminar (about being nice or something) the entire freshman class was treated to a picnic where I tried some more clumsy introductions. I noticed little improvement but felt ok – talking to half a dozen people was better than talking to no people at all.

When the boredom and blandness were over, I was shocked to realize the University's plans had served a purpose after all. We weren't just bored; we were bored *together*. We were bored as a class. And as long as there was something to run off to, someone talking and a crowd to glance around in, I had trouble stopping to feel sorry for myself. Wouldn't you know it... by the time I got around to worrying, there was nothing to worry about!

Still, I knew growing comfortable with being around people all the time would be an accomplishment for me. I'm used to a house in the country, half a mile from the road and even farther from the nearest neighbors. Eighteen years of adjusting is not something you shake off overnight. But, despite feeling constantly surrounded, I quickly learned to enjoy dorm life. I didn't love the noise, or the bathrooms, or a number of other things...but I got used to them, and I liked the guys I lived with.

The main downside to numbers is this: having 2/3 as many people in my dorm as had been in my entire high school made the University's size intimidating. At the start, I was afraid I'd never find somewhere to fit in and would have to spend weekends all by my lonesome for four years. That first week and a half, prayer was the one source of assurance that kept this thought from smothering me.

Luckily, one of the several honest things they tell you when you tour campuses as a high school kid is that college will quickly get smaller – make a few friends and suddenly, you have an entire network of acquaintances. In addition to the new friends you find, you'll meet their roommates, their friends from home, their *roommates'* friends. I never would have believed it if someone told me, but at a school with fifteen thousand undergraduates I see someone I know on my way to every class... and have since halfway through my first year!

As a person who never has and never intends to drink, perhaps my biggest fear (larger, even, than my community bathroom phobia) going into college was that I would catch a lot of flak for not drinking. Before it even started to get dark on move-in day, binge drinking – referred to simply as 'partying' because the alcohol is considered a given – had become a hot topic.

A frequent response to “do you party?” was “I have a good time, but I don’t get crazy or anything.” As I’d feared, planning not to drink put me in a slim minority. Most of the students I talked to seemed to believe that if you wanted to have a good time in college, you went out and got drunk. I worried that disagreeing with this popular idea would mark me as a wimp, a loser, or worse.

To my surprise, no one cared much whether I chose not to drink. I was relieved to find that although I was the only non-drinker in a 20-odd person corridor, the guys were friendly. Not to mention hilarious, and even in the two weeks before I started making close friends I always had someone to hang out and eat with. But when the first Thursday evening came along, this was not enough to remove my worry that I’d be spending weekend nights alone.

A week from that day I went to Primetime, and my dreary outlook changed. Primetime is the weekly meeting of Campus Crusade for Christ, an organization dedicated to introducing God’s love to college students on campuses nationwide. I’d heard Campus Crusade was big at the University, and I definitely wanted to see what it was all about. I hiked to Primetime with Dan, who I’d met in philosophy class and who would prove to be the first close friend I made at the University. We got very lost – made a wide loop all the way around the building we were looking for – and accidentally walked in the front doors a good 20 minutes late.

Since we showed up on our own schedule, it was tough finding seats; a crowd of nearly 800 had gathered in one of the University’s largest auditoriums to sing worship songs, pray, and listen to what the week’s speaker had to say. We were too late to see MC (or is it emcee? who knows) Dave’s welcome, but hadn’t met Dave yet so were unaware we’d missed some laughs. The band was great and the message was really good, plus I met some cool people afterwards. I’ve gone to many of the Primetimes since and am happy so many students at the University are interested.

Do I think attending Crusade should be necessary for all college students? Nah – a person’s relationship with Jesus exists (or does not exist) regardless of involvement in any particular organization. Getting caught up in the group itself would defeat the purpose, but any program set up to help students grow closer to God – and meet cool people with similar priorities – gets my meager support. When you go to school or if you are there already, see what you can learn about Campus Crusade for Christ at your college. And if you’re remotely interested, check it out!

## 5. What I Need

...Lots of junk. In my desk:

- 500 sheets of computer paper = Sometimes you have to print things out. You need paper.
- 10 CD-R discs = For burning stuff to CDs.
- Football schedule = Yes.
- Campus map = A must for freshmen.
- Stapler = Usually, I use this to staple things.
- Staples = These go into the stapler. The smallest box at the bookstore was 5000 staples. I could staple papers every day for the rest of my life and never run out.
- Calling card = I get lots of these as gifts and they are super convenient.
- Fine point marker = For labeling my perfectly legal CDs.
- 2 pens = For writing.
- 2 pencils = I'm not sure why I have pencils. I guess for bubble-sheet exams.
- 80 sheet notebook = For when I need a loose sheet of paper.
- Saline nasal spray = Keeps my nose happy
- Bookstore receipts = For records and so they don't rob me more than necessary.
- Stamp = Yes, I have one single stamp in my drawer. I bought two but used the other one.
- Ibuprofen (cold & sinus) = A big huge box of it. **40% more free!**
- 2 big packs of gum = Gum is good to freshen your breath and keep you awake in classes.
  - Honey-herb cough drops = I wanted the orange flavored ones but was tricked into these. They make the bags the same color on purpose.
- Pizza coupons = I never order pizzas, but if I did I'd save some money on them.
- Scissors = You'd be amazed how often there are things to cut.
- \$1.50 in change = It's just change. It's just sitting there. Sometimes I need quarters for laundry.
- Soda cap = With my favorite motivational phrase.
- The Bible = The guidebook for all the things they don't teach in classes. One book I actually want to read. I have the New Living Translation and I like it.
- Watch = My parents gave it to me, for tellin' time.
- 40 Envelopes = That's right; I have one stamp and forty envelopes.
- Candy = I've usually got some kind of candy sitting around. My family sends me all kinds of great stuff.
- Cards and letters = Like I said, my family sends me great stuff.
- Extra cash = If I have more than \$20, I stow it in a little can in one of my drawers (only rarely do I have more than \$20 in cash).
- Checkbook = That vitally important, annoying little thing is rarely balanced.
- "Mini Lunchbox-o-stuff" = for mechanical pencil lead and erasers, batteries for the remote, and yet another spare pen.
- Knit hat = I'd freeze to death if I lost it, and there's nowhere else to put it.
- Books = Good ones I always forget I have.
- Schoolbooks = Those things that cost about \$400 and an arm (or leg, your choice) every semester. Should have learned earlier to find them online, instead
- Notebooks = To keep track of the things I'm supposed to be learning in my classes.

In my closet:

- Wrinkle remover = An iron would work better, if I knew how to use one. I don't.
- Bucket w/loofa, soap, shampoo = I learned camping that you take a little bucket with you into the shower so you don't have to worry about getting community shower juice on your clothes.

- 2 hoodies = Hooded sweatshirts are great. They have that nice big kangaroo pocket, they keep you warm, and when you pull up the hood you can pretend you're a monk.
- Rain jacket = Light enough to be cool, but water repellent so I never get totally drenched when I'm wearing it.
- 2 Winter coats = For when a hoodie doesn't cut it. I have one that I wear a lot and a nice leather jacket for when I care how I look.
- Umbrella = I never carry it, but it's a nice thought.
- Racquetball racket = I played a couple times and then realized I'm not very good.
- Beach towel = Mostly used for leisure pool basketball.
- Hat = When the hat is not enough, it's time to get a haircut.
- Light-up football = This great little thing is from my parents. One night we threw it around for at least an hour in front of the dorm.
- Small duffel bag = Just the right size for a weekend at home or a road trip.
- Laundry hamper = I throw my dirty clothes in it; it folds up real small for traveling.
- Other clothes = I have a few pairs of jeans and some nicer pants, a lot of shirts and such...clothes you need for school will obviously vary depending on the weather.
- Bleach = Don't buy the tablets, they don't work!
- Dryer sheets = I got really sick of my clothes all being covered with static...
- Spare chapstick = for the winter days, when the rest runs out. Actually I don't think I've ever run out of, I just lose them.
- Antacid tablets = for when I let a headache go too far or the dining hall food is disagreeable
- Screwdriver = for my bike, although it only fits about three of the screws
- 8 Travel tissue packets = these things are nice when your nose won't stop running. I always have at least one in my backpack.
- Shampoo = I use a peanut-soap bottle's worth to take in the shower
- Soap = ditto
- 2 extra sticks of deodorant = when you sweat as much as I do you can never have too much deodorant.
- Spare toothpaste = in a tube
- Spare toothbrush = the other one's bound to fall apart eventually
- Zinc lozenges = these things taste awful but they really do work. Take a few of them a day if you feel like you're getting a cold
- Shoe deodorant = my feet stink. My shoes do too, unless I put this baby-powderish stuff in them
- Stain remover = my best friend

p.s. – I overlooked a ton of necessities, I promise. I'm baffled by the number of odds and ends I need over the course of a semester. Also, realize that every person has different needs (girls ESPECIALLY). Don't worry about having everything right away; lots of my things were acquired over time. Good luck, and be sure to make friends who have plenty of useful stuff!

## 6. Responsibilities and Such

As you prepare for college, teachers and relatives will more than likely try to scare you about all the new responsibilities you'll face. They will tell you how the classes are harder and everything is different from high school. I ignored most of that, but worried because... well... my mommy wouldn't be there for me. I don't actually call my mom "mommy," I promise – just trying to get a point across. Like many guys, there are a ton of things I'd always relied on mom to provide: namely, washing my clothes and keeping me fed.

For starters, did you know that at college you have to eat cafeteria food *all the time*? Granted, the food at the University is about four times better than in any high school cafeteria, but it sure is not home cooking. Don't expect someone to put it on the table and remind you it's time to eat, either. And how in the world is a guy supposed to know how to iron a pair of pants?

It's bad enough that you'll have to do laundry yourself, let alone keep a tiny closet in enough order that everything's not overflowing onto the floor. Add in the absence of parents telling you to do your homework, harassing you for staying up too late, and so on. It doesn't take long to realize that when you start out on your own, some of the biggest responsibilities are as simple as finding clean clothes and something to eat.

While summer break burned out, a real but humorous worry closed in on me. I realized I'd never done a single load of laundry. I was afraid I'd shrink or change the colors of my favorite clothes while attempting to wash them. I knew how to use an iron, but only if by 'use' you mean 'turn on and make stuff real hot.' Between that and not exactly knowing how to operate a washing machine, I expected to look like a somewhat wealthy hobo.

Luckily, wrinkles are easy enough to take care of. I wear jeans and t-shirts 97% of the time and have wrinkle releaser spray for the rest of my clothes. If I put everything away fast enough after it dries, it's not usually a problem. And my dad showed me how to use a washer (which made little sense to me, since he has somewhat of a reputation for doing the very things I feared) before I left home, but I wasn't paying much attention. I figured one way or another I would stay dressed and clean – after all, how hard could it be?

There was no reason to stress out. The washers in my dorm's basement are idiot-friendly, with no timers or complicated settings. All I have to do is press a button for whites or colors. The machine adjusts the water temperature and whatever else it is that's important for doing laundry, and bingo – come back forty minutes later to move everything to a dryer. I can even pay for it all using my ID card, so I don't have to scrounge around for quarters! It's a simple process, unless you put a new red shirt you got at a football game...this is entirely hypothetical, mind you...in with all of your socks.

Thanks to prudent financial management (spending just enough money to wash underwear and piling up my other clothes for mom), I stretched about \$25 to cover a whole semester's laundry. I usually wash clothes once a week, but I'm a sweaty pig. A person with normal sweat glands or more clothes could go a couple weeks before they had to do laundry.

If laundry is important, food is more so. Seeing as how you die without food, and all. I'm not the pickiest eater, but I haven't exactly got an iron stomach either. Since I'm a cheapskate, anything not covered by my school meal plan is pretty much out of the question.

Under this basic setup, I get a certain amount of money to spend on each of three meals a day. It may not be the most convenient, but leaves me with plenty options since there are more than half a dozen dining halls on campus. If I'm not hungry during mealtime, I can use the value on my card to buy snacks or a microwave dinner from one of the University stores set up adjacent to the dining halls. Realistically speaking, rare are the times when I feel like walking any farther than right next door – there's a dining hall with a huge buffet attached to my building.

I'm a person who likes to eat breakfast, and since I usually ate cereal at home I appreciate dining hall breakfasts. Most mornings there are bacon and pancakes, and I hear the waffles are good (although I've never taken the time to make one). Scrambled eggs are a semi-trustworthy staple. Finally, there's a solid selection of boxed cereals to fall back on.

Lunch and dinner are not as impressive, but if the day's home-style meal looks less than appealing you can always get pizza, pasta, a burger, or chicken nuggets. Much of the food isn't extremely healthy, but fruit and salad bars are available too. It's probably because of my laserlike metabolism, but I have seen no signs of that extra weight known as the dreaded "freshman fifteen."

At the beginning of the semester I enjoyed the dining hall food, but I think they make it better at the beginning to mess with everyone later on. In reality, I probably just grew sick of eating the same food ten times a week. Regardless of the reason, by the time December came around, what had started out awfully well had become hardly bearable.

Solution? I learned to make a point of eating somewhere else whenever possible. This way, I never felt too disgusted by the closest location when time was short or I was feeling lazy. Especially since my meals were already paid for, I did my best to get three of them a day.

It wasn't hard getting my body the food it needed to keep going, but what about exercise? College students – particularly at the notoriously superficial University – put a high priority on staying in shape, and eating right is only part of that picture. Now, I am not a big guy. And I don't want to be shallow, but I don't want to be scrawny, either.

At home I'd been biking over ten miles almost every day, which worked wonders for my legs. When I came to the University, I wanted to keep up my good biking habits and hopefully strengthen my upper body. I knew that because I get bored walking, biking should be no problem. If you're going somewhere alone, why spend ten minutes on what would be a three minute bike trip?

For this reason it was great having my bike at school. I biked to class, up the unforgiving hill into town when I needed something, and mapped out a route that circled most of campus. I never got the eleven-mile tour through the country I was used to at home, but biking for exercise in my spare time sure beat doing nothing.

Then the brakes went out. I saw it coming, since the pads got louder and screech-ier as they wore through. Braking to maintain control through a steep downhill behind the art museum (the highlight of an otherwise slow and traffic-filled ride) did them in; at last the piercing sound was the strongest result of squeezing my brakes.

For a few days I biked in spite of this severe lack of stopping ability... it was embarrassing. Invariably there would be a group of girls walking past when I came to a light and squeaked to a halt. Plus, stopping with my feet tore my shoes up pretty bad. I decided it was time to lock my formerly trusty steed onto the bike rack for good. I could have bought new brakes, but that would have cost money and it was a six-year-old bike due for retirement anyway.

Maybe in the spring I would get a new bike; until then I might as well get used to walking. Besides, walking is more social and it made me nervous to bike with so many people around, even though I only ran into a couple pedestrians over the six weeks I biked constantly... pedestrians create stress. When you cut between a couple girls and one of them sidesteps into your handlebars, the guilt sticks with you.

Walking almost an hour every day is probably better exercise than the average American gets, but my arms had been neglected far too long. I'm not a big fan of looking like a stick figure – and while it's wrong to obsess over being huge, it also seems dumb not to work out when you have every opportunity.

At school, I definitely have every opportunity. Admittance to weight rooms is free for all University students. This gives me access to a super expensive recreation center, with loads of different machines and free weights. I started "pumping iron" (that's what we call it nowadays, folks) at the beginning of first semester, even before my bike was out of commission.

At first I hated going to the gym – I worried that all the humongous, serious workout guys would laugh at me. I expected to see meatheads pointing at me and chuckling, but for once my paranoia proved unfounded. I realized that people are too busy worrying about their own appearances to care about mine. This fear dispelled, lifting was still no treat but it's healthy and I'm glad I did it. Two or three days a week I went with one of my friends, and over the first semester I got a little bigger.

The one truly problematic adjustment for me was learning to fight my headaches in a busier, noisier environment. Since junior high I've gotten serious headaches pretty frequently, and even though I've built some tolerance to the pain I often have to miss something fun to sleep off a migraine.

My funny doctor has repeatedly suggested a CAT scan to detect some explanation for my headaches but I don't like that idea. Instead, I prevent the worst ones by not watching too much TV, avoiding smoke, trying not to stress out, and most importantly getting lots of sleep. If I fall behind on sleep for several days in a row, I'll get hit by a killer headache that can only be stopped by two aspirin and at least an hour's nap. This is not something that fits very well with anyone's schedule, particularly if you have homework to do.

I had to hope I didn't get stuck with a night-owl roommate or a whole corridor of guys who never went to bed until 4:00AM. I knew that if I regularly got too little sleep, my freshman year would be a continuous struggle against my throbbing head. I prayed for reasonable peers and the ability to adjust.

Unfortunately, it seems like three nights a week there's a party right outside my door from 12:30 to 2:00, and not everybody feels the need to talk in a low voice. As much as I like the guys, it's annoying that quiet hours mean nothing to some of them. It typically sounds like there's a herd of wildebeests out there, running for their lives from a 90-ton carnivorous mammoth.

I know how irritating it must be for my roommate, having to live with a bumbling sleepyhead like me, and I'm thankful that he is pretty thoughtful. I think the continuous hallway noise is another way God's telling me to be more patient...and I'm learning I just have to turn my back towards the door.

So, it turns out I do have trouble getting enough sleep at school, but I can take care of the problem by catching a nap in the afternoon. People can't be noisy when they aren't around, so midday sleep is good. I find myself doing that at least three days a week, and the 'lazy bum' reputation is completely worth it to fend off sick headaches.

Something I have more control over is how I manage my time. First semester at the University, I failed miserably at this. High school had been easy for me, because I'm bright and high school classes aren't really hard. I took all the advanced courses my school offered but usually had a light homework load. Rarely did assignments take more than an hour.

Still, even in high school I would stay up late many nights because I'd spent the evening putting off schoolwork. If I wasn't playing Nintendo or hanging out with my friends I would mess around outside or sit and watch TV for hours. We'll say it's because I'm creative. I'm creative when it comes to finding ways to make simple assignments take forever.

Really, having bad time management is like thoughtless spending with a credit card. You can waste all the time you want and ignore responsibility, but in the end you're only hurting yourself. Just like interest fees dig you in a rut if you charge more than you can afford, wasting time can put you in a deep hole when responsibilities are overlooked.

If I were naïve, I could have convinced myself that since I did well in high school I would be fine in college. I knew a tiny bit better than that. The classes aren't *completely* different, but high school and college material are definitely not the same. And in high school, homework is something you have to do in the evening for a grade the next day in class – in college, "homework" is more vague, and oftentimes there is nothing to turn in.

If you hate homework (and who doesn't), this seems like the best news in the world. If you have trouble applying yourself when you could care less about the topic (as with most foundational first-year classes at a liberal arts school), lack of graded homework turns out to be trouble. Had there been assignments to hand in, I would have disliked my courses even more – but I suppose I would have gotten better grades. Graded homework means more points in the class, which means bad test scores hurt less.

In three of the four classes I took my first semester, I never once had to hand in homework. The professors gave us questions and assigned reading meant to help us understand the material, but didn't check to see whether

we completed either. When sections of a course contain anywhere from twenty to three hundred students and professors teach multiple sections, few professors have enough time or assistants to grade busywork.

There really is no excuse, regardless, for how I manage my time. Instead of doing homework I hated and knew no one would check, too often I chose to talk with my friends or play computer games. It seemed great for a while, because instead of the high school hassle of getting up at 6:30 and going to class for six hours... I could sleep in! After a hot shower I would go to a few classes scattered throughout eight hours, take my time eating before and in between, and then do nothing all evening.

I didn't care to do study problems or out of class reading, but that made for more work when finals time reared its ugly head. And don't think because I'm using past tense I've completely changed... I should be reading for class right now, but instead I'm editing this!

All things considered, the first semester of college is tough because many simple but new responsibilities mesh into one big challenge. I'm what most people would consider a responsible guy, and as a result I didn't have *too* much trouble coping with the freedom of college. My biggest struggles were with stress and time management, but I prayed and focused enough when it came down to the wire that I got good grades (mostly).

My schedule was great as far as class times, and I got almost as much sleep at the University as I got at home. I didn't have an unbearable number of headaches... I never got sick enough to puke in the community restroom... I got enough to eat that my weight stayed around a hearty 147. I turned only one small load of laundry pink – and having washed my socks again, you can hardly tell! My conclusion – pretend I'm insightful and wise for a second – is that if you resolve to succeed and rely on God for support, little can stand in your way.

## 7. Science is Ok

To an extent, you started preparing for college as soon as you began high school. A strong grade point average requires four years of work, and by junior year colleges have started directly marketing to you. Deciding where you want to go is tough, even though you have lots of time to think about it.

The mail slowly filters in, you visit several campuses, and at some point your big decision must be finalized. But the *real* work doesn't start until your high school GPA is a statistic and your on-campus housing deposit is part of the University's brick fund. Classes are the reason we call it "school," so you cannot reasonably say you're adjusted at college until you've adjusted to classes.

I was not looking forward to the general courses everyone has to take, and was slightly nervous about being in the honors program. I enrolled in University honors for the scholarship – not just for the sake of being a bigger nerd. I expected I'd handle honors classes alright, but didn't know how much extra effort they would take.

I would have been really concerned, but the requirements for an honors diploma didn't sound all that steep: by graduation I would need a good GPA and 10 honors courses under my belt. This meant if I wanted to start off at a good pace I would need two honors classes in my first semester schedule.

In addition, I would have to pass calculus to be admitted to the business school. I definitely wanted to get that over with, so I signed up despite a placement test score indicating I should take pre-calculus first. Boo to that...no way was I going to take more math than necessary when I'd gotten an A in high school precalc. The slower paced (and hopefully easier) version of calculus was a big five credit-hour class. I also had to take English 101, which left room for probably two more classes in my schedule.

Philosophy 111, "Knowledge of Deity, Morality, World," was offered as an honors class and would also cover the University's humanities requirement. I decided to register for it, which left me with five hours to fill. I saw few options – I needed another honors course but also needed a science, and the list of honors science classes was short. Further complication came with the realization that I needed a science that included a lab. Since I am no fan of labs, here was another requirement I wanted to cover as soon as possible.

Flipping through the honors packet for what seemed like the hundredth time, I found my solution. One of the two life-sciences listed sounded like it wouldn't be too bad: a four hour course catalogued as microbiology /botany /zoology and described as "a general introduction to basic concepts of genetics, evolution, and the origin of species."

Nice! A class that should be interesting, included a lab, and couldn't be too rough – why else would they describe it as both "general" and "basic?" The course number was even in the low, comfortable 100s. I decided there was no way it could be a terribly difficult class, since it applied towards the requirements of three different science departments. I put MBZ 113.H into my schedule.

Ironically, school itself is one of my lesser worries when I first move in to school. The course load might be challenging, but my lecture schedule is great for a freshman. Tuesdays and Thursdays I will start at 9:30; Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays my first class isn't until 11:00. With my first weekend on campus over, my books paid for, and my room starting to feel familiar, I am ready for a new year of reading and writing and 'rithmetic (not the 'rithmetic so much but there it is).

MBZ 113.H will be the first college class I attend. My first Monday begins at 9:30 when my alarm gets me awake and moving. I stumble to the bathroom, sandals on my feet and shower bucket in hand. Only once this weekend was the water cold, thanks to the girls upstairs...guess the old building had to adjust to residents again, just as we had to adjust to it. After my shower I go downstairs to the dining hall, and following breakfast it's time to make the trek to class.

Fifteen minutes later I am in a lecture hall with 59 nervously chattering students. For some odd reason there are three old-ish people at the front of the room. Are all three of those people professors? What are two extra professors doing in my class? The kid next to me, who has already been here for a few minutes, reveals the truth –

all three professors will be teaching MBZ 113.H. For a couple minutes, this makes no sense to me. Why more than one professor for a single course?

I think back to the description in the honors booklet, with slashes separating the words microbiology, botany, and zoology. Wait a minute! I bet each professor represents one of those departments... this cannot be good news. I doubt if there would be extra professors just hanging out here for no reason. It probably doesn't take three professors to teach an easy class, does it? I don't know...maybe it does...it's probably nothing to get concerned over...

During this first lecture we fill out bubble sheets about our background, personal interests, and professional goals. Wednesday in class we're shown an overhead displaying the survey's results, and I see for the first time what is really going on here. Of the 60 students sitting in a halfway-crowded lecture hall, 50 plan to attend to **medical school** upon graduation from the University. Eight plan on law school or some other form of graduate education. If you are counting, you'll notice that leaves me and one other poor sap who are just here for our bachelor's degrees.

It comes to my attention that I've gotten myself into a pre-med weed-out course – the first and perhaps hardest in a long series that will separate the doctors from those who can't hack it. This class isn't so simple that it works as basic credit in any of three life science majors, but so universal that it is required for every major in those departments! Excellent. Well, I liked science back in sixth grade when it was about rainclouds and guppies. But I doubt if a pre-med class will be as approachable or exciting.

I don't want to be a doctor. I don't *need* a course that will prepare me for seven long years of intense scientific studies. I signed up for this class to fulfill my lab requisite and part of my science and honors requirements. I hoped to maybe learn something interesting, but did not count on a pre-med level of difficulty coming with the package.

And here I am, taking a course whose mere acronym strikes fear into the hearts of medical students campuswide. My classmates repeat the terror stories they've heard about MBZ; I was unfortunately left out of the loop. Somewhere my registration advisors are laughing that a poor little business kid is stuck in this harsh, stressful science course. They should be fired.

I could withdraw and try to take something else, but I like the class times in my schedule. I like being able to sleep until 9:30 three days a week (and still take my time eating breakfast), and any attempt to find an easier science now that classes have begun would more than likely be futile. I tell myself that this class will be no big deal, and may even be an enjoyable challenge for me.

I'm intelligent. I think, "maybe I can take it, maybe I'm as good at science as all these crazy neurosurgeon wannabes," and you know what – that's sort of how it turns out. I stay in the class, I learn some interesting stuff... and looking back, still am not sure how I did so well! Thank God for a brain that understands life science and for guiding my hand to the correct bubbles on those multiple-guess tests.

There was never homework to turn in for MBZ. We were handed a syllabus at the beginning of the semester, which the professors stuck to closely. For each lecture we received a reading assignment with a study guide that had several questions to help us pick out main points. But the reading was heavy, the book's print seemed to shrink with each sentence, and it didn't take long before I decided skimming would do.

Have you ever sat down and tried to read twenty pages from a college biology textbook? After a few lectures I was down to reading once a week, if at all. I paid attention in class and took good notes and understood most of the material without trouble. When there was a test looming, I would triple-read through my notes and force myself to at least scan the bold terms in the book.

By semester's end my binder held a notebook half-full of lecture notes and definitions from the reading, six or eight completed study guides...and at least twice as many handouts I'd never so much as scribbled on. The topics we covered were interesting, our professors were cool, and I never skipped a lecture. Between paying attention to my teachers and reading the assignments periodically, I scored as well on tests as the average pre-med

student. A bit of the material went over my head and I certainly failed my fair share of quizzes, but for the most part I was impressed by my performance in a notoriously difficult class.

The honors section professors were vital to my success. One of them was decent but not great, one was really good, and the third was a downright great teacher. The trio took turns with the lectures, teaching for a week or two at a time as the material shifted back and forth between departments. It was obvious that each of them had great experience in their field, liked students, and was excited about teaching. They made enjoyable what could have been an awful course.

What I appreciated most was the sense of humor present, especially in my botany professor. Two of the teachers were absent for a lecture following a test most of us had bombed. We'd been prepared for bad news the class before, but one middle-aged, doctorate-bearing scientist was stuck with the task of revealing the average score. He became victim to the honors students' collective wrath, for a test he had only written a third of. For nearly the entire fifty-minute class, our professor paced the room cautiously, carrying a large wooden pointer as a sword.

When first he quietly revealed the average score of 62%, you'd have thought the building was on fire. It was probably the closest thing I've seen to a riot. The professor's attempts to persuade everyone our grades would be curved failed to calm down many of the hyperventilating students. He seemed almost serious (and rightly so) about needing to defend himself. But, even the most uptight students loosened up when at one point he swatted a good-natured pointer-parry into some rude kid's desk.

This was the best aspect of being in an honors section full of pre-med students: the opportunity to stress out and laugh with them. Seeing how obsessive the future doctors could become helped reveal the ridiculousness of my own worries. After several quizzes, I got used to the idea that I wouldn't be getting an A. I didn't mind not being the smartest kid in the class, and would have been content with a C.

In addition to stacking my deck with great professors and a reasonably capable brain, God blessed me with a good lab instructor (also "teacher's assistant," or "TA"). The lab that went along with the lecture portion of class was 2 hours a week, and my section met every Wednesday afternoon. Since the lecture was Monday-Wednesday-Friday, my Wednesdays for the whole semester contained nearly three hours of not-so-easy science.

Scott, my TA, helped each of us succeed; he explained every assignment in depth and oftentimes emailed us extra instructions to make sure we understood the out-of-class work. The activities were similar to the sort I was used to from high school, and most of them weren't too difficult. I'm not very good at labs though, so it helped having a TA who graded more generously than he could have.

Lab was an annoyance – biking there at full speed after another calculus lecture went too long, leaving me with no time to spare. Trying not to ruin mixtures and calculations, and being surrounded by kids who thought I was stupid for bungling things up. As far back as I can remember, when I think of labs or science activities I recall getting them horribly wrong, regardless of whom I worked with.

I couldn't tell you how many labs my high school groups had to redo because almost always, we recorded the worst results our teachers had ever seen. Luckily even *I* was incapable of wrecking the results in MBZ lab. More often than not, a more studious young man or woman was there to correct me before I melted something or killed our bacteria culture or printed our spreadsheet upside down. And, like the lecture, lab was nothing overwhelming.

Yes, MBZ turned out to be my favorite class first semester. Everyone laughed at me for staying in a pre-med weedout course, but many science topics still interest me and my professors were some of the best I've had at the University. The labs and tests were stressful but not impossible, and I miraculously did well without putting in as much work as I should have. Looking back, I would go far enough to say I **liked** MBZ. If only the same could be said for the rest of my first semester schedule...

## 8. Narrator vs. Philosophy 111

At 9:30 each Tuesday and Thursday morning first semester, I hiked to the far side of campus for philosophy. When I signed up, I assumed the course might be interesting – which would have been a bonus, really, since it would be covering two requirements for me. Unfortunately, I soon learned that PHL 111.H should have been listed as “We Can’t Know Anything about Anything, Ever.” Although it would fulfill requirements, it was not going to be very enlightening or exciting.

Since it was an honors section, there were few more than 20 students in the class. Smaller than a typical college class, this gave the benefit of allowing real discussion. I wish I could tell you what we were supposed to learn in the first portion of the course, about knowledge of the world. All I remember is days and days of ‘learning’ how we can’t be sure we won’t suddenly fall in a pit of spikes. We covered part of Rene Descartes’ Meditations, but stopped after the second one.

Descartes’ first two meditations were written to leave readers in a nice deep hole of doubt, and for some reason the lesson plan didn’t call for *Meditation Three: Concerning God, that He exists*. It didn’t take long to realize I’d gotten myself into something not fun – by the second day I found there was only one person in the room who shared my faith. It looked as though two days a week, 9:30 to 10:45, it would be us vs. the world. The professor did not seem to hold particularly warm feelings towards God or anyone silly enough to believe in him... nor did the TA... nor did many of the students. Leaving class after the first discussion/argument, I introduced myself to my only ally. Dan and I quickly became friends.

Philosophy may have driven me crazy without someone to share the aggravation. For the first time in my life, I found myself in a place where the majority disagreed with nearly everything I said. My core beliefs had never really been challenged before. Often, what I had always considered common sense was considered completely ridiculous in light of PHL 111.

The purpose of the course was to question what we could know, be it knowledge about people and things around us, religion, or basic right and wrong. We received a frustratingly radical introduction to the field of study, and many of our conversations were comically pointless. Since we ‘decided’ we should doubt everything from our own existence to whether our next step might leave us in a spiky pit, many of the questions emphasized were by definition impossible to answer. How much does that teach or prove?

In a remotely Jesus-friendly atmosphere, Dan and I would have been the voices of reason. We came up with some solid, simple answers that on more than one occasion should have satisfied the questions our professor asked. Instead, we were disregarded and sometimes mocked. Because we were ‘the Christians’ in the class, any verbal misstep or inability to answer on our parts meant Christianity had no sensible answers.

I’m not the sort of argumentative jerk who always has to win, but when your input is worthwhile it’s not cool being ignored. In sane doses, discussion to gain a perspective on radical doubt is thoughtful education... but being pushed towards doubt as the only truth in the world is a waste. Allegedly the vision for the class was open conversation and consideration of ideas, but in-class talks and homework grades proved this was not the case.

Long before the final lecture when our professor announced his position as a “militant atheist,” it was clear where he stood. Although he seemed like a pretty nice guy, his stubbornness and bias were annoying. Automatically, I was less intelligent than the other students because I blindly clung to my old-fashioned religion. This was no small detail since an entire third of the course was devoted to proving whether God exists. A theistic hypothesis was defined, and one by one we picked at the assertions of a human definition of the Supernatural.

Dan and I tried to question the sense in such an approach. Why should God have to fit with our flawed understanding? Why should we disregard everything that won’t fit into our bottle, that the human mind can’t understand? But for the purposes of PHL 111.H, it was into the bottle with God or out with him altogether. Philosophy was about knowing everything, so it was absurd to suggest maybe we *couldn’t* know everything. Any answer along those lines was “a cheap way out” and merely “begged the question.”

The professor liked answers with between little and no logical backing. One of the students explained his beliefs, a mixture of several Eastern religions. He couldn't find one that fit him, so he made up his own. It seemed complicated and much less sensible than boring old Christianity...and the professor thought it was very creative. He did not agree with the student's beliefs, but seemed happy that at least *some* of his students weren't silly sheep like Dan and I. He also approved of the strange answers of a couple students who announced that they practiced Catholicism, but believed their faith was "not the only right way."

The conclusion of the weeks we spent on divinity was that the theistic hypothesis is false. "It makes no sense, it's full of contradictions, and it's just flat wrong," our professor told the class. He explained that he thought religion was fine so long as it made you a better person, whatever that means. Unless you needed fooled into being good, God was a useless invention any intelligent student should reject.

At the 2/3 semester mark I was glad we wouldn't be ripping on God non-stop anymore. The final part of the course concerned knowledge of morality, and – brace yourself – we learned that there is no absolute truth. This section resulted in the groundbreaking discovery that moral relativism is the only answer; we can't actually know right from wrong.

According to moral relativists, the only things that define right and wrong are the ideas of the surrounding culture. We should not assume that traditional American values or anything else are the right way, because that is arrogant. If some guy halfway around the world wants to beat his wife and force his daughter's marriage, good for him. Literally.

It became ever more clear this was the overall theme of the course: any search for truth is a misguided and childish effort. We can't be sure of anything...any beliefs that we choose should be cooked up on our terms...true right and wrong don't exist. Do your own thing, get what you can without breaking too many rules, and everything's fine if you can justify it somehow. And we all know how easy justification becomes with practice. So, good news – nothing matters!

As much as I hate to admit it, Philosophy 111.H was a worthwhile experience. A different professor might have made for a stronger course, but one who disagreed with me was good in a different way. Although it wasn't fun, being forced to defend myself was helpful. Thanks in part to my irritating philosophy class, I've found a powerful new reason to learn all I can about God. Once in awhile I thought philosophy might kill me, but what it actually did was make me a stronger Christian with an interest in apologetics.

## 9. Calculus: Please, Make it Stop

I'm good with English. I understand the language, I have good reading comprehension, and I write fairly well. Naturally, English classes are something that I don't mind and even enjoy. I know a good number of people who think I'm weird because they hate English. They hated it in elementary, they hated it in high school, and they can't wait to get it over with in college.

I could handle never being in an English class again, but I'm fine with having to take a few credit hours my first year. The University requires all undergraduates to take at least two basic English courses, which so far has resulted in a much-needed GPA boost for me. If it didn't require being in school for two more years, I would double major in secondary English education.

English 101 was unexciting, but I got an A in the class without a lot of effort. My professor was a little old guy with a sarcastic sense of humor, and I thought he was cool. He was funny, seemed to enjoy teaching, and did his best to make the class interesting. Our only regular homework was brief reading assignments, we brushed up on grammar skills, and the big papers we had to turn in weren't too big.

I went so far as to register for an extra English class second semester because everything else was full. I enjoy learning about great writers, reading classic novels, and sharpening my language skills. Plus, when you find a college course you can get an A in, you tend to gravitate towards electives in that department.

Math, on the other hand, is not something I enjoy. I can identify with people who detest studying English and don't understand it, because I feel the same way about math – so much goes completely over my head. I got good grades in high school math... but high school math, serious as the advanced classes get, is not calculus. I struggled to understand some stuff in high school, but I handled it (never got worse than a B). Friends and great teachers made the difficult much more bearable.

What I hate is this: once you get past geometry you start to wonder what happened to good old-fashioned numbers. You know, those things you can plug into a calculator for an instant result. It makes sense that kids be required to learn basic mathematical concepts – even if you have a calculator it's important to understand addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and maybe a couple of those more difficult things. For the most part, though, higher math is useless for everyone not entering a math-intensive field.

Topics like geometry and low-level algebra are real and reasonable, but by the time you reach precalc you've gotten into all sorts of complex variable garbage. You only see actual *numbers* when they are being used as exponents or coefficients to variables; awful, confusing variables that have to be simplified, cancelled out, or worse. Then you have sines, cosines, and more abstract topics that make me sick just mentioning them.

No wonder calculus scared me from the start! I knew I could never hope for a teacher as good as those I had in high school, and expected that my professor would have too many students to care if I failed miserably. I also knew that, even with good teaching, high school classes were pushing the limit of how much math my brain could comprehend.

Alas, the University requires calculus for my major. Some bigwig decided it was something every business major needed to know. I don't know who made this rule or why, but I suspect illegal drugs and possibly blackmail were involved. Please, someone tell me why I need to know calculus.

My career goal is to start a firm that designs and maintains websites. I'm interested in the internet, I'm good with computers, and I have a talent for writing webpage code. I came to college to prepare myself for the future. How will calculus ever help me? I'm not tweaking the blueprints for a skyscraper, and I don't see myself manipulating the flight path of the space shuttle any time soon.

Never in my life will I use a single thing I learned (or rather, was supposed to learn) in calculus. But the University wouldn't give me a degree if I didn't take it, and I wanted to get it over with. Calculus was the worst class on my first semester schedule by a long shot. If I ever find myself in a course harder than calculus, I will drop out of school, move to Canada, and devote my time to getting a date with Avril Lavigne.

The first day of class I walked in 10 seconds late. Or maybe the professor started early, which is possible because he seemed to start earlier every afternoon. The one thing I noticed as I went through the door (besides the fact that I was late) was the size of the class. About eighty people, almost four times as many as had been in my biggest class in high school. The next thing I noticed as I slid into an empty chair in the front row was that my professor was thoroughly foreign. And I had five days a week of this to look forward to. For sixteen weeks. Excellent.

I should have withdrawn to another section as soon as I saw my schedule, because my professor's last name had eleven syllables in it and I could pronounce only a few of them. Now, don't get me wrong, I've got nothing against immigrants. But if I'm taking lecture notes on a subject I don't understand, I'd sure better be able to understand the words themselves. I would be half lost in calculus if it were being taught by the Enunciation Champion of the Midwest, so the last thing I needed was another degree of confusion.

One night at study session a kid asked the supplemental instructor where our professor was from, because though he sounded South American he had never told us. The answer was a bit of a surprise – Guam. I had never met or heard of anyone from Guam. I was under the impression all they had down there were rare species of jungle animals. I stand corrected: it would seem that Guam is home to lizards, monkeys...and calculus professors.

His accent was heavy, but not terribly difficult to get used to. After a week or so, I could decode nearly everything he said. For example, he might say, "Now on da queez you hud to substract da vareeable minoos da factor of da secont term," and I would figure out from his clean markings on the board that he was talking about subtraction and factors and something-something. It didn't really matter, since the translated English carried little meaning.

I only skipped three lectures the entire semester, which I'm proud of since I had the stupid class five days a week. I might as well have skipped every day because I learned for maybe 16 of the 72,345 minutes I was there. And that's a generous estimate. The professor went over things quickly and skipped steps as he did problems on the board – he was one of those guys you could tell was frighteningly intelligent. If we asked a question, he would repeat what he had just said as if there were no reason it should be difficult. A few people seemed to follow, but then out of 60 (after the first day, many of the original 80 were never seen or heard from again) college students you're bound to have a couple math geniuses.

As for me, the only hope was study session. Bryce, the supplemental instructor (SI) for the course, introduced himself on the first day of lecture and passed out papers for us to let him know which times would work best for out-of-class sessions. The second day he told us when the study sessions would be, gave directions to the building and room, and invited everyone who needed help.

At first glance the student instructor might have been some math-crazed guy getting extra cash for a job that came easy to him. He would likely be as confusing as the professor himself, I thought. Fortunately, I was hugely mistaken in my initial judgment. Bryce was not being paid, had taken the job for work experience to be a middle school teacher, and was a great help.

There were study sessions three nights a week, and each lasted an hour. Bryce worked through problems with us, gave us some of his own examples, and answered questions. I went to most of the study sessions. Everything I learned about calculus, I learned from the supplemental instructor.

It sucked walking an extra 10 minutes in the dark and cold when the weather changed, but I knew it was my only chance. Before tests twenty people might show up for study session... normally there were just three to six of us. Nonetheless, the sessions were rarely cancelled. Bryce did his best to see that we understood everything we needed to.

Even with this frequent tutoring, calculus was a losing battle. I tried to do the homework for maybe the first week, but when I had no clue what to do on the very first assignment I knew it was pointless. The book was a waste and since the professor never checked our assignments my homework motivation quickly ran dry. Why burn

another frustrating hour every day on something that was beyond my grasp? Take away its weight on my GPA, and I couldn't have possibly cared less about calculus.

All I wanted was to get credit for the course and never think about math again. But midway through the semester, I started to seriously worry about accomplishing even that. I knew I'd been flaking out on homework and studying, but I simply didn't care. I could not find motivation to spend extra time on something I hated so much.

Thankfully the professor curved the tests, of which there were three...followed by a final that would be worth twice as much as the others. With no homework scores and the totaled quiz grades worth only half a single test grade, the tests were everything.

I got a 64% on the first test. It came as a shock, since in high school an 85 would have been a low grade for me – but the shock was small. A curved 64 was a C and I was happy with that; a C would get me through calculus without damaging my GPA terribly. An “average” grade would be perfectly respectable and absolutely great as far as I was concerned.

Then I failed the second test with a 44, and I started to panic. There was no way I could fail calculus. If I failed it would ruin my schedule for at least two years, it would murder my average, and it would be all-around terrible. If I hadn't learned much those first months about putting struggles into God's hands, I would have lost it. I came close enough as it was.

This wasn't the first time I had panicked during the semester. The second week of classes I missed three questions on my first science quiz and half the questions on my first calculus quiz. I wasn't used to missing more than one or two questions on anything, ever. I nearly flipped out, and it was ridiculous. For several days I worried that this was only the start of bad grades to come, that I would lose my scholarships, that my college career was going to be a wash.

Slowly I calmed down, and prayed about it with real expectations of getting an answer. God gave me more peace than I had felt in a long time, and I stopped worrying so much about everything. I worked a little harder from then on and took a step back when I felt myself going off towards the paranoid end. God worked on me again when I failed that second calculus test.

When I thought about it, I realized a 44% on one test might not be awful. After all, I had only failed by a point given the curve, and my score from test one was a C. I was in fair condition, so long as my only goal was to pass. The third test came along, and I crawled through it with a mid-range D.

Halfway through December, the only thing left in my way was the final. I was determined to prepare much more than I had for the regular tests, and hoped for the best. By “best” here, I mean any score resulting in something other than failure. Many times I've needed God guiding my pencil – this time, I would need him standing in the hall with an answer key and a bullhorn.

## 10. Atypical Day

I wanted to outline a typical day at college, so incoming students might have a specific idea of what to expect. Mostly I meant for this to be a warning against procrastination, an illustration of how much turns up that you need to take care of in a single day. I'm bad about putting things off until it's almost too late, so I know for a fact that it tends to catch up with you. The day I decided to catalog was a random one – a normal autumn Tuesday. The date was September 11, 2001.

In light of the terrorist attacks, I figured the purpose of my dumb little chapter had been defeated. I wanted to write about a normal day, and that Tuesday was anything but. Then I thought more about it, and realized the day's terrible events would emphasize my point. It was a morning like any other; I even remember thinking how nice the weather was as I stepped out into the crisp fall air.

The day soon became a grim, shocking reminder that we should not take the time God has given us for granted. Don't leave important things unsaid or undone, because you never know what the next day might bring – or whether it will arrive at all.

With so many experienced, qualified authors and journalists covering the events of September 11, 2001, I will make no weak attempt to talk about the implications of that day in any sort of depth. I will, however, include recordings from my notebook as I'd originally intended. So, following are the details of this college kid's day:

8:00AM – My clock wakes me up. I switch off the noise and open my eyes wide to avoid falling back asleep.

8:01 – I roll out of bed, grab my toothpaste and shower bucket, and head for the bathroom.

8:28 – I'm done with my shower, go back to my room and get dressed.

8:50 – At the dining hall I run into some guys from my corridor. Usually I eat breakfast alone, so it's nice having people to sit with for once.

9:10 – I head back to my room...on the way I pass a cute girl and she says hi!

9:15 – I grab my books and leave for philosophy class.

9:25 – What!? I walk into class and a girl says, "Did you hear about the trade center?" She proceeds to tell us that a plane hit one of the twin towers, and that as she watched the second tower was hit. My first reaction is that this was a terrible accident; then as we talk we all realize it must have been something even worse.

9:29 – The professor arrives to class. We talk for much of the time about the attack. The professor uses it as evidence that God must not exist. I wish I knew more so I could prove him wrong. For once I have little trouble staying awake in philosophy.

10:46 – I feel the relief that always accompanies the end of this class. I leave the building extra fast since I have things to do.

10:55 – I cross the street and walk into the bookstore. The local AM news station is on, and I pause when I hear that the Pentagon has also been hit. This is serious stuff...everyone knows you don't mess with the Pentagon. I forget my shopping for a moment to catch the rest of the story, and hear that more planes are unaccounted for and may have been hijacked.

11:12 – Shopping done and a hike completed, I arrive at the nearest computer lab. Despite the state of the country, my microbiology work has to get finished. I doubt if any classes will be cancelled.

11:26 – I have to pay to print out my work at the lab; I can't do it at home because the assignment requires a program I don't have. I wish I'd paid better attention when my TA was explaining how everything was supposed to be turned in. Luckily the handouts made it easy enough.

11:32AM – While I'm running around I make a quick stop at the University bookstore to buy a sweatshirt for my dad. I know that if I wait much longer I'll forget, and my coupon will have expired.

12:07PM – I'm back in my room. For the first time in weeks I turn on the TV to watch the news. On my walk back every conversation that I overheard was about the attacks. Everyone knows by now, and everyone is shaken.

For the first time I see a video clip of the plane crashing into the second tower, and they are playing live footage of the trade center billowing smoke.

12:30 – I change clothes and walk to the recreation center. I work at the machines for awhile, since I don't have anyone to spot me on free weights. The AM news station is on in the gym, too. I pause between sets and ask the Lord to watch over my country. Using my ID card I get a granola bar, a slushie, and a cup of fruit on the way out. During the walk home I work on the slushie; the rest will be shoved in the fridge for later.

1:12 – I step back into my room to find the guys from next door watching TV with my roommate. I finish my drink and sit down to email my parents.

1:56 – After watching the news on TV and talking it over with some of the guys, I really have to leave for calculus. It takes four minutes to bike to class, but it takes about a minute to unlock my bike and another minute to chain it up when I get there.

1:58 – I think I biked the half-mile to calc, through all the foot traffic, in a little over a minute. Class is boring and mind-numbingly confusing as usual. The girl I sit by sometimes is not here.

2:52 – I have English in the same building as calculus, but not for another forty minutes. I leave and ride back to my room, rather than sit around outside. My neighbors are still glued to the TV. I'm thankful for my faith and the knowledge that God's in charge and somehow, everything will be ok. I sit around and talk about the whole mess for a little while with the guys from my corridor.

3:20 – Time to get to English. I actually am prepared for this class. The professor, an elderly man, walks in red-eyed and says a few words to us about the attack. He talks about how this might result in a reduction of our personal freedoms. I don't share his pessimism but then I'm young and not all that smart. He is serious and the idea is scary.

4:57 – Back from English. I'm glad classes are over but am not looking forward to a long night of homework. There's a huge reading assignment for microbiology, I still have to finish a lab assignment, and I've got a calc quiz tomorrow.

5:12 – I drag my books downstairs to the study room in the basement. It's usually much quieter, plus here I can't sit at my computer for hours talking to people online. Unfortunately there are a couple guys down here studying very loudly for a quiz on ionic compounds. I'm ticked at them for being noisy and at myself for not getting work done yesterday.

5:50 – I drop my books off in my room and leave for a campus-wide prayer vigil in response to the day's events. It starts only a few minutes late. The speakers are pretty good, and it's watered-down but uplifting. A huge number of people have gathered to pray for the nation's well-being.

6:32 – I get back to the dorm, worn out from even more walking than usual.

6:47 – I call the girl from calculus to see how she's doing. She wasn't in class today and I know she's from New York... her family is fine and she seems to appreciate the thought.

6:50 – I gather up my books again and go back to the basement. I really hate homework, and tonight I have lots of it.

7:49 – I start for my room to pick up a notebook to take to academic advising. A guy I run into on the way tells me it's been cancelled in favor of a meeting to help anyone hit especially hard by the attacks. Since I'm halfway upstairs anyway, I go to my computer and start typing my lab report.

8:30 – It's time to watch President Bush's address to the nation... he gives the best speech I've ever seen him give. I wonder how much of it he wrote. Regardless, his resolve is heartening and his delivery is great. Love that guy.

9:07 – I decide I've accomplished as much as I can hope to tonight. I sign in online and talk to one of my little sisters for awhile. She is upset about all the news. I put forth a futile effort to make her feel better.

9:45 – Time to get ready for bed, since I need to wake up early in the morning for homework.

10:23 PM – Somehow I always sit at the computer for way too long. For once I use my head and hit the hay when I realize what time it is. If I don't get out of bed early tomorrow I will *really* have no time to finish my work.

The more I look over it, the more I realize a verbal snapshot of one day could never give a suitable impression of college life. After all, the scary part of graduating from high school is being on your own, fully in charge of where you go and what you do. If you're sensible and mature enough to make decisions for yourself, college is nothing to be afraid of. Instead of worrying about all your new power, enjoy it – appreciate little things like the weather, free time, and making people laugh. Remember that you are loved, that daily problems don't really matter, that God is there for guidance at every step.

It's when you look at this world the wrong way that freedom really can become frightening. As rewarding as it is to make smart decisions, the consequences of bad ones can be severe. Stay out too late, and you might not have the energy to crawl out of bed in the morning. Sleep through too many classes, and you may find yourself getting kicked out.

I could go on, but you get the idea. College life is much less linear, less black and white than high school. It's a lot different than sitting in classes for six hours, with breaks in between where your only options are shuffling to the next room or making a run for the parking lot. After high school much more time is yours to manage, but there are more responsibilities to handle within this time. Choose wisely.

## 11. Philosophy, round 2

I understood my philosophy professor's opinions. He was an atheist: he believed there was no meaning behind the universe or the lives of men. Yep, I understood his opinions fine – well enough to know they weren't as solid as he insisted. But of course, as the teacher, he ultimately decided which direction our class discussions went. Bottom line? He was always right, and I was always wrong. If you know people like that, you understand what unenjoyable arguments can result.

I'm not the most self-confident person in the world but I'm not so weak that every disagreement hurts me. Doctorate or no doctorate, my professor was another imperfect human and my faith is strong. I often did a poor job of defending myself in class but I knew my position was right. The people who told me I should write papers pretending I agreed with the professor had a point, but I refused to sell God out. Some things are too important to mince words over. Having gotten a C+ on my first paper, I handed him my second with this in mind.

When it came time for these papers to be returned, I almost *expected* to see a bad grade on mine. I was curious to see how he would justify giving me anything less than a B. I had carefully covered each requirement listed on the assignment sheet. My paper was as long as it was supposed to be, I used enough quotes, I cited page numbers, and I watched my grammar. I put a lot of time into it, went over the assigned topics, and even worked in some deep thoughts.

Despite my mental preparation for a letdown, I was angry when I saw the amount of red covering my work. The grade I had (supposedly) earned: a C. Throughout the essay, sentences and entire paragraphs were crossed out. We were dismissed once we had our papers, so I stuffed the mistreated thing into a folder and left.

When I got back to the dorm and took a minute to read over my professor's comments, I got pretty steamed. At the end he had scrawled half a page about how my essay was "peculiar," about my problems with putting everything out of order, about the amount of ink I had wasted on lengthy rhetoric. He emphasized the fact that I had not really answered the question at all, and criticized the lack of support I showed for my thoughts. I *tried* to look at my writing as objectively as possible... and still found few criticisms that made sense.

So my introduction made him mad – I suppose real philosophers mustn't use introductions. And how does one perfectly good paragraph need to "get to the point," while the next equally reasonable paragraph is "sketchy?" Since most of the class did poorly (few of us agreed closely enough with the professor's views to receive the grades due good philosophers), we were given a week to revise our papers and hand in new versions. For those who missed on the first try, he told us, the best we could get on the rewrite was a B.

My friend Dan had gotten an A on the paper with his first try. He was a comparable if not more mature Christian than I, felt exactly the same as me and got just as torn up in class discussion. However, Dan had figured out how to do well on these big papers without selling out. Instead of trying to be philosophical as the professor told us we should, he wrote straight from his notes.

Dan's paper was a well-worded version of the theories we had discussed, combined with repetition of the "conclusions" from our class arguments. I followed suit for my rewrite – this was, in fact, busy work and not a serious assignment as I'd first thought. The professor didn't expect our opinions; he wanted his own opinions reworded and spit back out. My second attempt was a dumbed-down, chopped up copy of the original. It got a B. More summarizing and less thinking somehow equaled better philosophy.

Something was particularly troubling about the way my faith-based opinions were attacked, and after much wrestling I got my brain around it. When someone asks "what if...?" in the name of doubt, the academic elite call it atheism and consider it a sophisticated, respectable position. But when someone uses "what if..." in support of God, they are discounted as narrow-minded and gullible. An arguing atheist's main weapon is this spin that is too often overlooked.

Another trick I noticed was that I immediately became a bad philosopher any time I "retreated" to faith as an explanation for something. "God did..." was unsound but somehow "evolution gave us..." was above question, solid as a rock. And even if evolution were false it wouldn't matter, because whisking away God was the task at

hand (if need be, evolution could be doubted once He was out of the way). Philosophy, we were taught, means doubting everything. Real intelligence means knowing when to stop.

There was little stopping in PHL 111. Anything and everything were doubted for doubt's own sake. Because it was difficult to argue in support of God, for a third of the semester our professor tried to help us realize that the intelligent route through life is disbelief. Never mind that defending the atheist position was as difficult, because remember: atheism was not the stance being attacked. I won't deny there's a point where you have to take a step back and ask yourself if what you believe is really true. But why must God's existence always be approached hypothetically?

I think it's healthy to question the things we believe. Faith that can't hold up to logical questions is not faith worth keeping. If Christianity didn't make sense, I wouldn't be a Christian. I'm too pessimistic and quite frankly too smart to believe in something that merely sounds nice and is not the Truth. Sooner or later, each of us must make up our minds. If Jesus were not God, and had not risen from death, his apostles (a pathetic, depressed, terrified bunch on the night of His trial) would not have given their lives spreading his Good News. You and I would never have heard of Him.

It frustrates me when people say they are Christians, but then make sure to sound politically correct by covering with "but I don't think other religions are wrong." Do you believe – to quote Jesus – "no one comes to the father, but by me," (John 14:6, Revised Standard Version) or not? A wishy-washy faith doesn't seem to me like faith at all. The Bible says that reliance on Christ is the *only* way to salvation, not a shiny ideal to follow when that's the kind of mood you're in.

I know God exists. I believe the Bible is his instruction manual for human life, and that its words are true. I know Jesus of Nazareth was sent to cover for the sins of each and every one of us, and that He was resurrected following his execution... would Rome have let anyone think this had it been otherwise? I believe that God created the earth, human decisions are to blame for the problems we see today, and all of this amazingly fits together as only God's plan could.

A popular philosophy question: How could a loving, all-powerful God allow suffering? Ok, the world is not perfect. But while we're asking difficult questions: How could we truly love if we had no ability to do otherwise? Some things cannot be fully answered no matter how smart you'd like to think you are. Love is possible only because we have free will. And suffering, simply enough, is the result of you and I (and the billions before us) misusing our God-given freedom.

Many self-righteous academics would say I am crazy; there is no God, and my faith is an invention to help me sleep easier. In philosophy class, I got to see what the atheist standpoint truly consisted of. Much of it was picky argument starting from a generally accepted – but still human – description of God. A serious philosopher, if anyone, should realize the ridiculousness of expecting God to fit into our comprehension and terms.

Sure, I think God is eternal and omniscient. Nope, I can't understand how either of these things work, let alone how they work simultaneously. But please, should I think that because I can't fully understand God, he must not exist? That's a little shady – I would see more reason to doubt God if I *could* fully understand him. God is above and beyond our world, and if we suppose him to be Creator of the universe then it's silly expecting to understand every facet of his power and knowledge.

This was only one of many issues we addressed in PHL 111; most of them were similar, indicating nothing more than shortages in human brainpower. "People pretend there's a God so they can be happy," we argued over ... wouldn't it be easier to do whatever I want and pretend it's ok? "If God made everything, he would have to make himself, and that's impossible" – it sure is... so what? If you can't believe God existed before He created the universe, how can you believe the universe existed as an unexplained 'compressed mass' before randomly exploding, forming galaxies and planets, and so on?

**There is a bigger picture.** We've messed this world up, but God is watching and working. I do my best to live as God wants me to, referring to prayer and the Bible and fellow believers for guidance. I am far from perfect

but God gives me joy, peace, and strength, all things that – even as a college guy – I realize wouldn't be found in a world without Him. God gave me freedom to choose and then, through Jesus, freedom from my own bad choices.

Take a quick look around, and it's clear that people make a lot of stupid mistakes. There's so much we just don't understand. The smartest and kindest of us fails to always love those around him, and is bound to hurt at some point even the people he cares most about. Yet we stubbornly tangle ourselves up in our own greatness and ideas, refusing to believe in what we can't understand. God loves you and has a plan that's bigger than you...period. If we could only grasp that, the rest would make sense.

Assuming science can explain everything is one of several ways out – our hearts tell us we should believe in *something*, and with science we hope for answers that will not force us to admit defeat. For too many people, this seems to be enough. We can't believe in God, but we can believe Dr. So-and-Such who's selling us something less.

Some say science proves there is no higher power beyond nature: nature is random and the universe came to be through the explosion of a mass of supercompressed particles. They insist that we came about by natural selection upon random genetic mutations, imposed on spontaneously appearing cells of life, in an environment able to support them for no reason. Now, these theories may not require a divine Creator, but require just as much faith.

Keeping in mind the definition of the word 'theory,' do we even have enough evidence to respect the popular theories for the existence of the universe? Explain the big bang: where the first particles came from, why they were arranged in such a way, why they burst outward and then regrouped into solar systems. Can anyone do that?

Here we've got a problem, because no one can answer this without running in broad circles of theory that would require more faith than does my trust in God. Of course, you could fall back on "technology is improving and we will know the answers soon enough," but you'd still just have faith in theory. Faith is faith no matter what you believe to be behind it.

And what about evolution? Some scientists say early cells developed from lightning striking sea foam, which over time evolved and changed into progressively more complex organisms. The order that we see in natural systems and living things is not really order, just a survival-friendly arranged chaos.

Should anyone be willing to buy that? A universe from an explosion is one thing, but myself and my loved ones and our emotions developed from electrocuted mud? That would mean accepting the big bang (or any similar theory of randomness), and adding a few million more randomly magical events on top...or, spelled differently, faith with a capital F.

I don't care how many millions of years they say it took or how much halfhearted 'proof' they dig up – eyes and blood clotting and a million other complex systems created by luck? Look at us, at the depth of our thinking and the unquestionable existence of deeper stirrings – the human mind and soul weren't 'evolved' from clays and polymers. It's wildly improbable to the point that even under ideal circumstances, the many hundreds of thousands of chance mutations required would be impossible.

Now, what kind of worldview could result from a theory that we're animals on a speck of rock drifting out towards nothing? It's super pessimistic, and justification for people who enjoy thinking there's no reason not to do whatever they want. Unfortunately for their egos, science and philosophy cannot disprove God – no matter how much more intelligent and rational the doubters claim to be.

The hours of reading and reflecting I've done in search of thorough support for my beliefs were caused all but completely by God's use of my annoying philosophy class. For the first time, my faith was seriously interrogated by people who honestly disagreed. In retrospect, I can understand now how it was good for me. Slowly I'm seeing that we were never meant to be the center of the universe.

I only wish I had been more prepared going in, and could have carried myself better in PHL 111. I saw anger at God, stubborn insistence on knowing everything, and emptiness in the honors students (and instructors) around me who had convinced themselves God is a hoax. I hope my sorry efforts nudged someone in the right direction... it might be encouraging to see a fellow honors student sold on God's love.

For our stubborn faith, Dan and I were looked down upon as immature, shallow... even sheep. Through it all I *tried* to show love, confidence, and patience. I did not do any of these three very well but I'm always learning. On that note, I'm sure my wording and arguments must make less than perfect sense. Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis, More Than A Carpenter by Josh McDowell, and Darwin's Black Box by Michael Behe come highly recommended for filling in the gaps...

## 12. Keeping in touch

When you've settled in at school, staying connected with loved ones at home remains a concern. For some people the distance may actually be a blessing, a great opportunity to break free from childhood struggles. For me, this is not the case. I have parents who love me, little sisters who are great, and some of the best friends a guy could ask for. My entire life I've lived in the same house, on the same road, in the same school district. Eighteen years is a heck of a long time to get comfortable in a place... especially a place that treats you well.

And we all know that while familiar surroundings are comforting, what really makes a "place" so great is not the place itself, but the family and friends who live there. It was sad having to leave all my loved ones knowing I probably wouldn't have time to sit and write letters or decent emails or even make serious phone calls. Keeping track of people can be difficult, especially when classes and other activities are at weird times and distractions constantly surround you.

Despite all this, relatives and family friends from home reminded me I was in their thoughts with a veritable deluge of mail. That's right, I said deluge. During the first several weeks, I must've received nearly a metric ton of letters and cards with words of love and encouragement. And throughout not just my first semester but also those that have followed, holidays are brighter because people back home take time to let me know I'm not forgotten.

Furthermore, day-to-day small talk from school back to home and with friends at different Universities is no problem. When properly motivated, I can give someone a quick call with one of the phone cards I've gotten as gifts. But, I sort of hate using the telephone, so I save those for rare occasions. The real technological gift that I take advantage of is a little something Generation Y (I think that's us) likes to call instant messaging. Using software so simple my parents can understand it, I can type back and forth with anyone who has internet service and a free account.

Because all my friends are on school networks at their respective universities, it's easy keeping track of them. And although our access at home is so slow I want to cry, it works well enough that my sisters or parents can talk to me online every day. Even kids in the handful of underclassmen I talk to from high school are available to check in with from time to time.

I am always plugged in to the University's high-speed connection, which allows for reliable internet access and makes everything online faster than ever. At home my internet time was limited since there was only one phone line in my house, but at school my roommate and I can both surf and chat all day without rendering our phone unavailable. All of this is very convenient ...and very addictive.

While the ability to stay in touch for **free** is truly a blessing, it's one that comes with limitations. Being able to talk to two or three people at any time throughout the day can be a burden on my schedule. More than a few times I've shot several hours of an afternoon talking to people about nothing in particular, when I signed on intending only to say hi or ask someone a quick question. With a hundred or so people in my buddy list, it's easy to start several "quick" conversations and forget that I've got three chapters of something or another to read for class.

For someone in two honors classes and evil, dirty calculus, this is not the best way to spend my time. The lesson I've kinda learned is that no matter how much you care about people and no matter how hilarious they are, you can't sit and talk for hours every day. Keep tabs on people, say hello from time to time, sure... but don't lose track of everything else. Besides, typing on the computer is no great form of communication anyway.

Staying connected with people takes more than talking online— even if you do so daily — and while I would love to visit some of my friends at school, crazy schedules at both ends tend to prevent this. There is always homework or something more important to do over the weekend, not to mention I haven't got a car here at school.

Finally, at the end of first semester, I found an opportunity for friends to visit me at school that worked with everyone's schedule! I was last to finish school before Christmas break, and for half a week everyone else had been sitting at home. Sadly this week was University finals, which meant nothing exciting was going on here, but I had a break between tests and it was a now-or-never deal. I knew I wouldn't study for two *whole* days and my friends were probably more bored at home than they would be taking a road trip, so I decided to have them visit.

We couldn't have asked for better weather, considering that winter was closing in. Although I did bore everyone awhile with my inability to catch anyone at home (they must have thought my new friends were imaginary), the afternoon was a great one. I gave seven of my close friends a short tour of campus, took them to my favorite restaurant, and at last introduced them to the best friends I'd made since coming to school. We walked in the nature reserve behind my dorm, watched the sunset from atop a cliff, and of course had a good time making fun of each other.

I fell asleep that night happy to have had one of my best days since I'd come to school. Old friends, new friends, and life-shortening but delicious food – how much more could a guy ask for? It seemed weird making such an effort to hang out with people who for years were always just there, but the prize was worth the effort.

Developing deep bonds takes awhile – especially for guys, who aren't big on talking about touchy-feely things. You might think I'm an exception, being some kind of "writer" and all. Um, I definitely am not. Only so many times in your life will you know people as well as you know your high school friends. If you are headed for school and have old friendships you want to maintain, be intentional about doing so.

### 13. Drinking is Dumb

The title here, I'll confess, is meant to grab your attention. I should retreat quickly – I don't want to infuriate people and I'd rather the brewing company folks *not* send a hit man. I stand behind my blunt wording only under the circumstances I've set out to address. I think the social drinking that so many college freshmen participate in is stupid because invariably, it leads to getting drunk. Worse yet, there are more than a few students who regularly drink with the intention of getting "s\*\*t-faced" or "f\*\*\*ed up." Anyone with a good argument as to how this is even remotely intelligent, please stand. Thank you.

So, yeah, I don't drink. I actually have never tried beer, or anything else alcoholic for that matter. Does this mean I think anyone who drinks beer is a bad person? Nope – I make a few hundred mistakes every day; the fact that drinking is not a problem for me does not mean I'm any better than someone else. I also do not think there is anything wrong with an adult having a drink or two once in awhile, but that's not the way college students drink. The approach and attitude are what I find so pointless.

At the University, it becomes obvious every weekend that for many, beer is truly a foundational aspect of the college experience. A huge number of smart, talented students risk their futures on a regular basis. And for what? Because people get tricked into thinking getting drunk the only way to relax, fit in with the crowd, and have fun.

To disagree with this I must be some scrawny little ferret of a kid with windowpane glasses and no friends, right? Otherwise I wouldn't be opposed to having a good time, because after all the *cool* kids know the importance of having a good time. Not so fast! I'll admit that I have never been described as a big guy – this much is beyond argument.

But there end the similarities between myself and my fictitious anti-drinking stereotype. I'm not entirely too boring to have a good time, and I don't exclude myself from alcohol because of a dweeby "I'm gonna tell on you guys" attitude. I just think drinking is unintelligent, and why would you want to do something you know is dumb?

Now, I must be more careful here. As C.S. Lewis once said, "I think it is a risk to talk about things which are not in my own make-up, because I don't understand them." On one hand I agree; I recognize the fact that not everyone has the same outlook and personality I do. In light of this, I need to be careful with my assumptions and wording.

But on the other hand, "drinking is the way to have fun" is such a widespread college fable that I have seen much of it, and most of the causes are general emotions anyone could identify with. So, please forgive my inconsiderate tone and know that I do not mean to be harsh. I doubt if many people will agree with my opinions, but this is not enough reason to steer clear of what is unquestionably an important topic.

It's clear enough why choosing to drink could seem like an easy decision. Peer pressure, which I hate mentioning but cannot reasonably ignore, is a key factor. Of course, this does not mean peer pressure in the after-school-special "just say no to the creepy kid wearing leather" sense. It means peer pressure in the sense that alcohol is considered a vital part of the college experience by...pretty much everyone.

College has been accessible to the general population for long enough now that when little Billy goes off to school, Pop looks back on his University days with nostalgia and buys a case of brew to get Billy started. Everyone understands that drinking a gallon of beer every weekend is no good, but somewhere along the line we decided that alcohol and college should go hand-in-hand.

Picture a scene I witnessed hours ago: freshman move-in. The weather is hot, the dorms are crowded, and you have never seen more strangers in all your life. But you talk to your roommate and a couple neighbors and maybe a friend from high school. What are their plans for the first night away from home?

Well, one guy has an older brother in the coolest fraternity on campus, and this girl knows a girl whose house will have 4 kegs tonight. And unless you've run into one of the 1-in-25 oddballs like me, the other freshmen you talk to have similar plans. There are parties with beer, your parents aren't around...and even *they* partied when they were in college. In an immature, instant gratification, self-serving culture, we're given the impression that losing control is cool.

As a result, many smart, responsible students see no risk or moral reason not to drink. Lots of people do it, only rarely does someone die from it, and if you say or do something stupid you probably won't remember anyway. If you don't grow sick of the taste or the crowd noise or the hangovers, eventually you'll get the attitude that after a tough week of classes, you **deserve** the calming effects of a drink or two...or thirteen. Custom becomes habit, and your liver pays the price.

By the time you've been at school for a weekend or two you realize that "going out" commonly means "going out and getting so drunk that in the morning, I might not remember how I got home." I know I am conservative by most definitions, but can't you agree that this is an unhealthy attitude?

In my experience, I haven't met a college student who drinks and *always* keeps things under control. Still, it seems like most of the people who drink have themselves convinced it's not a problem. A typical answer to the question, "are you a partier?" is the half-truth, "I like having a good time, but I don't get wild or anything."

Self-control is the reason I've never felt tempted to drink, including before my relationship with God developed much. I'm big on control and, well, partying and staying in control are two things that don't go together. Inability to speak clearly or walk straight or drive safely are more than enough reasons to keep me convinced, and the idea of being drunk to the point of blacking out is just plain scary.

Unfortunately, even the most intelligent drinkers go too far once in awhile. "Pre-game" alcohol consumed before going out impairs thinking, which can quickly lead to drinking more than your body can take. It's understandable, how you might lose track of how much beer you've had even if you didn't leave home with the intent of getting mindlessly drunk. And the results can be more than ugly.

I've seen too many guys wake up asking themselves how far they went with some girl the night before, and what they were thinking to bring her home at all. I've heard too many girls laugh as they say, "I got so messed up last night, I have no idea what I did after that party." It's genuinely upsetting that so many people find it funny to abandon their decision making abilities for several hours a night, even if it's 'only' two nights a week, three weekends out of the month.

How bright is it to risk going too far with a stranger or getting arrested or stepping off the curb into the front bumper of a speeding semi? This question isn't asked enough, because we don't really, truly stop to think about it. At eighteen years old we are capable of so much good, yet we put off being responsible.

We're bad about pretending we are invincible... even those of us who almost die of alcohol poisoning, or wake up in bed with someone from who-knows-where. The sensible freshman will see such an occurrence as a wake up call, maybe even admit some guilt – but in many cases forgets the whole thing a month later. As teens and as a society we focus so much on excitement that we rarely stop to look at possible consequences. This is a mistake that ought to be considered inexcusable for anyone smart enough to be in college.

What a simple, solid reason for avoiding alcohol: it's stupid. While I think this is a viable argument in and of itself, as a Christian I've got an equally powerful second reason for not drinking. I recognize God as creator of the universe, and believe He made me and has a plan for my life. I've met and care about people who agree with this and still have no problem with getting drunk.

They say things like, "God wants us to have fun, doesn't he?" "after all, it's not like there's anything else to do on the weekends," "there's no harm in a few beers once and awhile..." so on and so forth. Maybe these people do a better job of staying in control, and drink less often than someone who sees no bigger picture or purpose to life. But as someone who believes that an all-powerful God is always with you, why bother with the issue at all?

Just as we all make mistakes, we all need people who care about us to have courage for addressing them. That is my only intention here. Drinking is no unforgivable sin, and many of the people I know and love struggle with it or have struggled with it in the past. I hope that some small piece of what I have said has been convincing without sounding arrogant. If every friend who disagreed with me on this topic were to read and be offended by my thoughts...I would not be left with many friends.

Regardless of how often or how severely you get drunk, stop to consider why. And yes, I understand the weight of stress. We are bad about trying to control everything and be perfect, but have you thought about the fact that it's making you self-destruct? If the only way to keep your controlled life from driving you crazy is to go out of control on the weekends, you might want to revise your game plan. Beer and college are a normal combination, but normal does not equal right. God is there. God will fix it. God does not give you a hangover.

#### 14. This is supposed to be Fun?

Not wanting to seem like a stuck-up hermit, I agreed the first weekend after moving in at school to go partying with my roommate. Now, I hadn't decided to give drinking a try. Call me boring, (ok, I am pretty boring) but getting tanked honestly has never held any appeal to me. I did think it might be exciting – or enlightening, at least – to check out this legendary undergraduate experience known as the frat party.

My roommate had gotten a personal invite from an old friend, and called to verify that I could come along. It was no problem, I was completely welcome... so long as we brought lots of freshman girls with us. Not wanting to anger the frat guys and wanting even less to anger the females, we stopped to pick up a group of girls on the way; my roommate's high school friends and some new acquaintances of theirs. From there we walked to the party in one giant mass, a slow process since the group now contained a number of done-up young women wearing fancy shoes.

After a long walk we came to an intersection at the edge of campus. We could hear the party as soon as we saw it. There was a crowd of what looked like hundreds, overflowing from the house into the front yard. A small number of people were dancing on the front porch and there were many more inside, visible through a bay window.

Nervousness set in at this point. How would upperclassmen treat a horde of annoying, trespassing, measly freshmen? Maybe they would act like animals, making a big show and yelling at us when we came in. If not that, someone surely would notice I wasn't drinking. Maybe when I rejected their beer, they would point and laugh and throw spiky things at me.

While these fears were real, they were nothing gigantic. Whatever happened, the situation was relatively safe and at any rate God would take care of me. Bottom line: the only way to find out was to go in, and there was no turning back now. And besides, I don't think I've ever heard of somebody dying at a frat party from *not* drinking.

As we marched through the front door we got a mix of indifferent and nasty looks. Only new students traveled in such large groups. "Arrggh, freshmen" seemed to be the thought penetrating the air, but soon everyone forgot and most of the people became agreeable. My roommate quickly found the fraternity brother who had invited us.

He was surprisingly friendly, and appeared happy to see some of his old high school friends. We were introduced and I was heartily welcomed. Within our first minute inside the rest of my group (except the large share of girls who had turned back immediately after our victorious entrance) had drinks, but I was not harassed for remaining empty-handed.

We mingled for a little while, if that's what you'd call shuffling around apologizing to persons much larger than yourself for bumping into them or being in the way. My roommate soon heard that a drinking game was underway in the back room, so he and his two lady-friends from home joined in. With nothing else to do, I shrunk back towards the wall and watched them get drunk (which didn't take more than half an hour).

I tried to appear comfortable but was clearly out of place, and couldn't resist the urge to stay on my toes in case of trouble. After all, I was the only person in a considerably large room who did not have a can or big plastic cup in his hand. I kept imagining what would happen if the clan of upperclassmen playing cards to my left decided they didn't like the looks of me. Much to my relief, I never got to find out.

Later we ran into another of my roommate's friends from high school, who was party-hopping with her roommate. They were in the process (yes, it can be a process) of deciding it was time to go, and were soon ready to move towards the next hot spot. As we stood on the front lawn waiting for the girls to come out from the restroom, I noticed a beam of light sweeping the grass nearby. One of the brothers in the fraternity was talking to an angry policeman maybe ten feet away from me, apologizing emphatically for the noise.

My roommate, who had been drinking for some time by this point, practically sprinted for the house when he noticed the cop. I followed him inside. There was no reason for me to flee, except that I would rather not take my chances around a cranky man with mace and a gun and far more power in court than any 18-year old – sober or not

– at a frat party. On second thought, maybe I had *every* reason to get away from Mr. Policeman. Everyone inside was talking in hushed tones and those under 21 were scattering like small creatures from a T-Rex.

As you might guess, the appearance of a police officer (who stopped in to say hello by writing the fraternity a \$200 fine for violating a city noise ordinance) killed that party with the speed of an atom bomb. The girls finally made their way out of the bathroom and we slipped away with the crowd while the frat brothers were still trying to avoid citation. For the most part, the remainder of our night was uneventful. We walked to another party that was pretty much the same except even more crowded, and then left soon after it became evident the beer was gone.

Everyone but me was determined to make the most of our night, so we stopped back at the house where the first party had died so quickly. My roommate wandered off to relieve himself while I stuck with the girls, who I followed upstairs with the frat guy we'd originally been invited by. The three of us sat around while we (and by we I mean the girls) talked to him and a couple other fratties who lived in the house. My roommate was not seen or heard from for the remainder of the night.

To my surprise, this part of the night was actually enjoyable. With no beer left and a much smaller crowd to impress, the frat guys were down to earth and fun to listen to. They were friendly and, contrary to the most extreme of my fears, hanging out with them certainly didn't kill me. If I hadn't been with two attractive girls I doubt I would have been treated the same, but that's a whole different story.

What did I learn from my night? Drunk people are like me, except...well...drunk. For a number of reasons, many students view things differently than I do – leading to decision that, if you ask me, are not smart. Tonight also taught me that most drunks will leave you alone if you leave them alone. Alcohol is, after all, a sedative.

The differences between a drinking party and a non-drinking party? Well, if there is free beer you can bet many of the guests don't know or care to know the hosts. And when you're party hopping with drinking buddies, it's hard to tell whether they'd care much if you were someone else. Otherwise, going to a party to get drunk is socially the same as going to an alcohol-free party.

Well, except it might be harder to carry on a meaningful conversation if you and most of the people around you are varying degrees of intoxicated. So what is the point of social drinking, again? If I wanted to stumble over my words and embarrass myself while meeting new people and shuffling through a mob, I'd rather do it on my own. Granted, I hate crowds anyway, but parties can be fun without the pretense and crutch of a big booze-filled cup.

I went to bed my first party night with a slightly better understanding of my generation. Seems like about 85% of University freshmen drink at least periodically. I think I'm correct in assuming that drinking is just a crappy way to loosen up, fit in, and "have fun." My experience reminded me to feel blessed in having a sense of security that requires no mass approval.

Thank God for my near-indifference towards popular opinion and for the fact that I don't mind being boring. Give me a few friends and a couple new people, and I will have a much better time than 290 sloppy freshmen packed into some muddy backyard. Plus, when I go out I don't have to make a conscious effort not to fall down every time a police cruiser goes by.

## 15. Oh, Canada

The longer I'm at school, the more I find there are plenty of fun things to do without being stupid. Aside from all the activities set up by the University, there are concerts in town and loads of people to hang out with. And the simplicity of the movie theater or borrowing a DVD goes without mentioning (I'll mention it anyway). Most of my nights are not especially well planned, with fancy stuff like "somewhere to go" or "something to do."

If there isn't a concert to see or a sporting event to attend, I play videogames or watch a movie or wander campus with my friends. Prime example: spending Friday night tossing around a light-up football, hiking to the cliffs near campus, and watching *Swingers* with Dan and Scottie until Becca and Kristi come over to hang out. Simple, but so very good.

There's a lot to be said for visiting with people and not actually doing anything, plus I've been to several house parties that were pretty cool. Sometimes we'll get a group together to watch a movie in someone's dorm room, and University-organized weekend distractions actually can be fun. Even for those who are tough to please, if you look hard enough you'll find something good to do. Remember that who you are with means more than what you are doing – if you surround yourself with cool, reliable guys and girls, you will always have fun.

And if everyone's out of town, bumming around is perfectly enjoyable following a stressful week of classes. Finally, if you're feeling both bored and brave: find a karaoke night, sing in front of a room full of strangers, and make a fool of yourself *without* risking life, limb, and so forth. A goofy thing to do, but...ah, I have no 'but' for this... karaoke's goofy, and that's all there is to it.

I'm not being facetious or exaggerating: there are ways to have **fun** at school without drinking. I mean, come on – the University supports some 300 student organizations. With thousands of teenagers within a few square miles and all kinds of sports and special events going on, finding something to do is not a problem.

As if friends, movies, club activities and athletics weren't enough, the University has a great music program...almost every week it seems like there is a glee club concert or opera or something to go to. But I'm a guy, so you know what? I'm going to talk about sports for awhile.

Intramural sports are great, not terribly expensive, and tons of fun when you find something you like. First semester I signed up to play on an intramural (IM) broomball team with guys in my hall. Since hockey is big at the University, broomball is a huge IM sport for those too clumsy to skate. In addition to the men's beginner league my team was in, there are also a regular men's league and both regular and beginner women's and co-recreational leagues.

Broomball is exactly like hockey except the sticks are weird shaped, you play wearing shoes, and you hit a ball instead of a puck. Correction: broomball is nothing like hockey. But you can see how the ice thing makes it sort of similar. The point is, this is a game that's awkward but fun!

Shockingly, I was good at broomball. I played conservatively, always hanging back near our goal. I was our last line of defense (other than the goalie), and stopped most of what came my way. Since I was not one of the worst players on my team, broomball was a blast. At a cost of only \$10, I was on the ice for the majority of all 7 games we played. The smart players used their feet more than their sticks, so my two seasons of high school JV soccer turned out to be good for something after all! Broomball was a decent workout and a fun way to relieve stress.

Because the game is played on ice, moving around or even standing still can be tough. Most of our games, however, the surface was torn up enough to run on. On good nights I would fall down only three or four times. The positive news about playing on ice is that this makes it easy to knock people over. Broomball is supposedly a no-contact sport, but you usually have to do something real bad to have a penalty called. So you learn to use your stick for defense, and discover early on that to keep the ball you'll need to be a little rough.

Kind of like little kids playing soccer, one problem with broomball is people's tendency to bunch up and whack the ball all the way to the far end of the rink. Usually this made it easy for a defensive player such as myself to get at the ball, but if I held it for long I would be mobbed and beaten.

One game I perfected a tactic where I'd stand a few extra seconds with the ball near my team's end. This gave my teammates time to set up, and sent half the other team rushing at me. Four times in one half I dished the ball up just before a player or two from the other team skidded past, swearing and/or hacking at my legs. They had left their defense outnumbered, and better yet a couple of them fell down trying to stop too fast.

Despite several losses, my team snuck into the bottom of our division's tournament bracket. Since we were the last team to make the cut, our first tourney game was against the number one team from another beginners' bracket. Their numbers were ridiculous – an average of three goals scored a game, with .66 goals allowed per game. We assumed it would be another team of hockey players, like the one we'd played during the regular season. That had been an ugly match; we were shut out and every steal we had got us all but murdered. The refs don't call many fouls during 11:30 PM games.

Expecting a repeat of that helpless, not-much-fun experience, many of my teammates talked about getting trashed the night before our Sunday morning tournament game. Granted, it was only intramurals...and we stood little chance anyway...but I was glad when most of them decided not to. One of my next-door neighbors apparently missed the memo – he stumbled out of his room that Sunday with a freshly pierced eyebrow.

“When did you get that?” I asked.

No response. My question registered after a moment.

“...Yesterday. ...Damn. I'm still drunk,” he replied weakly.

When we left for our hike to the hockey rink, he was sitting on the bathroom floor dabbing antiseptic on his eyebrow. He was our leading scorer by a long shot, so the game would be a more severe beating without him. Luckily, his girlfriend drove him to the rink – he was there, mildly sober, in time to start. Although we all knew our season would soon be over, we tried to be a *little* optimistic. We hoped to not get crushed, and would try our hardest to prevent that from happening. It'd be fun, so long as we didn't get thumped completely.

I played one of my best games, but hit a snag early on. I don't know whether my stick was knocked away from me or if I just dropped it, but I found myself empty-handed and facing an opponent who had the ball. Without my only weapon and alone in front of our goalie, I had few options.

I slid at the ball, kicking at it while my opponent tried to control it with his stick. Stumbling over me, he tried to make a pass but I sent the ball the other direction with my hand. Mistakenly thinking this would buy me some time, I got up and turned to grab my stick. But the other team came back with the ball, and I spun around to see a not-very-defensive player alone to defend our goalie from what would be an easy shot.

Re-equipped and ready for action, I rushed to place myself between the ball and the goal. I was too late. The guy looked like he was about to shoot, so I did the only thing I could think of – I yelled as loud as I could. It didn't seem to faze him, but he didn't score either, so I felt alright. Ridiculous, but alright...at least the other team did not score their first goal on account of me!

Our opening tournament game was the whole team's best performance. We passed as a team, controlled the ball, and had an all-around impressive showing. We forced an undefeated team into a shootout, after tying them 1-1 *and then* keeping their offense down through an overtime period. I myself blocked several shots and our solid goalie blocked many, many more than that.

An animal on the ice, (not an intimidating animal...maybe a wombat...but still an animal) I also provided the assist for my team's lone goal. It was an exciting game and we never expected we'd have anything to get so pumped about. We were let down when we lost by one goal in the shootout, but still were very happy to have done so well. Later that day I discovered a nasty lump on my leg where someone had jacked me with a stick and I hadn't noticed. Half the fun of sports is getting banged up, I think.

Going to a University football or hockey game is almost as much fun as playing intramurals. Hockey is my favorite – since I can't skate myself the next best thing is to watch other guys tearing across the ice, checking people around like rag dolls. It's hard at first to keep track of the puck and understand the rules, but the barely-

controlled violence and speed are far too sweet to pass up. I mean, seriously, who can resist a sport where players go flying head over heels, into the bench, or right out of their helmet?

I'm glad my school has a good hockey team, and happier still that students get in free with a University ID. Combined with the knowledge that hilarious guys like Norm MacDonald and Mike Myers are Canadian, hockey is almost reason enough to consider moving. Ok not really, but it earns Canada a little respect.

Combined with wandering in the company of friends, watching movies, and playing video games or intramurals, varsity hockey and other sports are more evidence that we students are not limited to narrow options for having fun. For the four-dozen-th time, think about how you relax and reconsider how cool it *really* is fitting with the college stereotype.

## 16. Spring Break

Two short words... eleven measly letters: that's all it takes to put a twinkle in any college student's eye. Spring break is revered as an escape from the stress and studying of school, and looked forward to as an indication of summer's rapid approach. At the very least spring break means leaving campus, but for those with money saved up it's an opportunity to do something much more exciting than sitting at home for a week. Don't get me wrong: home is great and family's even better, but spring break is a time to spend a little cash and get some sun. It's a tradition no one would want to end.

Second semester midterms are looming, but spring break is near and I'm getting excited. I've been out of town with friends on evening or weekend trips here and there, but never anything close to spring break proportions. The three-day weekend of fall break four of us went on a mini-road trip, and shortly prior to Christmas break a group of guys and gals drove to see a light display. Both trips were a lot of fun and proof that getting off campus with cool people is great, even if it's only for an evening. With this in mind, how much better will spring break be?

Campus Crusade for Christ starts early hyping the trip they're going to take. I am talked into signing up and as the date nears I'm happy with the decision. A huge group of us will be spending a week in Panama City, attending a conference on evangelism, enjoying the weather, and talking about our faith with students on the beach. Some of it sounds scary, but for the most part it should be a lot of fun and I don't want to miss out.

Everything seems to be mapped out – as of Thursday night, 140 have registered for the trip. Crusade is borrowing four University vans and has chartered two buses, leaving 30 of us to drive down in separate cars. I'll be traveling in style in my friend Taylor's small sedan with Taylor (of course), Dan, and Ryan, a sophomore brother in the fraternity that Dan and Taylor are pledging. As soon as I'm finished packing, I spend my last afternoon before break in hibernation. Tonight's car trip will be huge compared to anything I've done all at once, and I'd like to be Responsible Awake Boy for the whole thing.

At 5:30 Dan calls to let me know they are on the way, so I gather my things and run one final inventory in my head as I go downstairs and across the parking lot to the church next door. Many of the "bus people" are already there, but the buses themselves are nowhere to be seen. Dan, Taylor, and Ryan show up around 6:00. We grab a copy of the directions, I load my things into the last empty spot in the trunk, and we are off.

The sun is already going down but the first leg of our journey will be an easy one – only about 45 minutes before a stop at Dan's house for dinner. Once there we talk to his brother, watch some TV, and jump on the trampoline before his parents get home. After a quick dinner and several caffeine-heavy sodas each, we're back on the open road.

The four of us are already in trip mode, eager to reach our destination but prepared for the long haul. It's around 9:00 when we get back on the interstate, but we make good time and before 11:00 catch up to our group's University vans. I spot them in the right lane as we close in, and Dan decides he'll hang out his window to wave as we go past doing 75. Only a few people recognize him, while the rest give us the 'who is that psycho kid hanging out of a speeding car and yelling at us' look.

After a short time Ryan and I talk him into keeping at least half of his body in the car. Dan laughs but then a moment later starts digging in his pockets and seat. In a panicked voice, he says, "Guys, I think I lost my wallet." Taylor mentions turning back to look for it but we remind him that we're on the interstate, and it's dark, and we'd probably all die. Luckily, after another tense minute of scrambling around, Dan finds his wallet between the seat and the door. We've had an early scare...but at least everyone's staying awake!

At 11:34 we pass the national Corvette museum in Bowling Green but sadly it's not much to see in the dark. At 11:38 we break out the first round of pop since leaving Dan's. Sadly, the buzz from dinner has pretty well worn off now. Taylor drives another half hour before stopping to fill up on gas and let Ryan take over. It's time for a complete changing of the guard, so I move to the illustrious and influential position of copilot.

Before we've even left the gas station it's clear that Taylor is exhausted... Dan is slipping away, too. Looks like I'm solely responsible for seeing that Ryan doesn't fall asleep and careen off an embankment. As I snap open

two more cans of pop, fizz gets on the windshield... for a second I think, "Oh no, it's starting to rain!" Immediately I realize my mistake, but I know my brain has begun to slow down. The rock CDs we're listening to are losing their effect and the caffeine doesn't seem to be doing its job.

In Tennessee the highway speed limit jumps around between 55 and 65 but we stay between 75 and 70. I don't know when I drifted off, but I'm abruptly pulled back into consciousness by the sight of headlights drifting towards us from the left. My heart skips a beat before I realize it's a patrolman pulling into the median. Ryan taps the brakes and I decide I should distract myself with the signs listing distances to upcoming cities. Birmingham: 127 miles.

We follow the road to the right around a gentle downhill-sloping curve. Even at this hour there is an endless chain of paired white dots coming from the opposite direction. It feels like we are in hot pursuit of the taillights suddenly disappearing over the next little hill. I'm so bored and so tired. I wish I had a pen and paper so I could get all this mental drifting down. I wish I could write like Hemingway, somehow making every bland sentence sound poetic. No, even with a pen and paper it would be too dark to write. Plus, every dumb idea sounds like gold when you're half asleep. Birmingham: 98. Going, going...

I can't make this drive feel like an adventure. Because I know I'll forget everything, thinking of creative ways I could word each thought soon loses its distracting value. Sunlight—my eyes snap open. "This is nice and bright," I mumble stupidly as I sit up and stretch. "Yeah," Ryan chuckles. A short leg of the highway is lined with tall lampposts that feel blinding to my tired eyes. I'd fallen asleep. It might have been for only a second, or half an hour.

Which track of the CD was playing last time I looked? Ok...it's still on 12. I need another pop. Birmingham: - I didn't look up soon enough. We are practically alone on the interstate now, but our driver's side tires are starting to knock the reflectors on the pavement with discomfiting frequency. I remind Ryan that I'm ready to drive whenever he wants to stop. Dan and Taylor have been out for two hours. It's a little after 2:00 AM.

We stop for gas but Ryan insists on being fair and finishing his four-hour shift. At 3:45 I switch into the driver's seat in a restaurant parking lot south of Montgomery, Alabama. Ryan is pretty well finished now, so Dan rotates to the front and promises to stay awake. I say a quick prayer as I put the car in gear and make sure to remind Dan how bad I am with directions.

He has the instruction sheet and we're an unstoppable team. Ryan's a goner already and Taylor—who earlier mentioned getting only eight hours of sleep the last two nights combined—is practically snoring. I figure two hours, and we'll be there. Grab something to eat, get into the condo, and sleep the morning away.

...two hours have come and gone and here we are, still plugging along. Dan's fading in and out at copilot but I'm feeling alright. The interstate isn't exactly crowded at 5:00 in the morning, and we're making excellent time even if the trip is taking longer than we'd expected. We crossed into central time someplace back in Alabama, so it's not quite 6:00 when at last we reach Florida. The sun coming up has an uncanny appearance since I feel like a robot and have been awake since before the sun went *down*.

In Florida the traffic picks up and the speed limit goes back and forth from 70 to 65. The other drivers appear to be racing. I try to keep it between 80 and 85 but find myself following groups going 90, as fast as 95 for maybe thirty seconds until I decide that's a bad idea. Dan wakes in time to give me directions and help watch for signs.

Finally, finally, finally, at 6:30 central time we arrive in Panama City Beach. Dan and I happily toot on party horns (brought along for just this occasion) as we cross into our destination city, forcing Ryan and Taylor awake. Which is good because at the very first stoplight, Taylor's car dies.

"WHAT?!" I burst. I was so close to completing my driving without a hitch, and now this. "Yeah it does that sometimes," Taylor says, leaning forward from the back, "just put it in park and restart the engine." I guess Taylor's car doesn't like being driven at 85 for several hours straight and then suddenly stopping at a light. But I am one step ahead of him, since the car I drive at home is old and dog-like. The engine is running and we are moving again as the light changes. We stall only once more before, at 6:50 AM, we see our resort at long last.

The main parking lot is gated off and we remember that check-in doesn't start until noon, (ouch!) so I turn in to the front lot adjacent the main office. It's a good thing my driving shift is over, and it's a good thing nobody else is in the parking lot, because I have all the room in the world but somehow fail to park straight. Immediately following our exit, as we are stretching our legs and squinting in the sun, the guard at the gate tells us, "You can't leave your car there; you'll have to go across the street."

I, being meek, suggest that we listen and move the car but Taylor has a better idea. We mosey into the office to explain our situation, despite the guard's obvious disapproval. The secretary at the front desk is very friendly. He gives us a temporary parking pass & our bracelets for re-entry to the resort from the beach. We crawl back into the car and Taylor holds up our pass while grinning at the guard, who shakes his head and raises the gate.

Currently I am much too tired and hungry to enjoy the fact that I'm standing at the opening to a full week of freedom from class and schoolwork. At this point I've been awake for twenty of the last twenty-four hours, not to mention the most recent four of those were spent driving too fast at night. My nerves are worn out and I'm getting a headache. For all intensive purposes, I am currently a waste of space.

Taylor parks the car near one of the three ten-story towers of our resort, and we stumble across the Panama City Beach strip. As we are learning to walk again, we decide to go down the street to a waffle place. Breakfast – which seems more expensive when you are several hundred miles from home – takes care of our near-starvation. The waffles are decent and we joke around a little when we're done eating. Still, I'm so tired it's a good thing there is little traffic. I feel like I might collapse into the road as we are walking back to the condo.

At the car, Taylor pops the trunk and we dig into our luggage. We may not be able to get in our room, but at least we can be first on the beach! The car serves as a changing room. Once we're in our swim trunks we gather up Becca's kite (yes, a large neon pink dragon kite...she didn't have space for it on the bus) and our towels and make a beeline for the Gulf. There is hardly a cloud in the sky.

Although the morning sun is bright to the point of being blinding, the air is cool and there is a stiff breeze. However, keep in mind that we are college guys. We pull our shirts off anyway, and this is where I make my biggest mistake of the trip: in my sleepy near-stupor, I haven't bothered to put on sunscreen. I'm on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico on a cloudless day without a shirt and without sunscreen. That's right folks, a University honors student at his finest.

The four of us run straight for the water, turning and sprinting back twice as quickly once its chill reaches our knees. For a few minutes we cut wandering foot-trails in the cool sand, trying to appreciate our surroundings as we get used to the sun's unrestricted barrage on our poor eyes. It's been years since I've been to the ocean and looking out over the water still creeps me out.

I can't handle the idea of ocean stretching farther than I can see, and I'm happy to be safe on the shore. Don't get me wrong, the Gulf is fantastic and beautiful but I'm more comfortable around cornfields and forests and *normal* bodies of water, like a stream for example. The ocean is a strange thing – it's so peaceful and so frightening at the same time; a natural reflection of God's power that is topped only by the stars.

Meanwhile, Dan and Taylor are excited to get the kite in the air. They slap it together after briefly struggling to make the supports fit – it looks just as pink put together as it did in the bag. There are other colors on there, but they are hardly noticeable against all the neon *pink*. Ryan and I laugh at Taylor and Dan while they wrestle its four-foot wingspan into the air and run to catch the wind. At least an hour is spent in this manner, with condo residents peeking out here and there, laughing along with us from the balconies of their tower suites.

Soon we tire of running around in circles and fighting the kite, so we wrap up the strings and flop down on our towels. Despite the bright sun the air remains chilly, which is especially noticeable since we insist on being half naked. After maybe an hour of fitful sleep and shivering, we make the thirty yard hike to our condo's pool. Its water is only slightly less cold than the Gulf, so our "swim" is more of a "jump in fast, jump back out" trial. The hot tub looks more inviting.

While we are dozing in the hot tub, pressed against the outer edges to leave space for a funny little kid who ignores his grandma and keeps swimming miniature laps, our friend Claire spots us and comes over to say hello. She flew in yesterday and is the first person we have seen from school. Claire leaves to read in a chair by the pool and the longer we are in the hot tub, the more lukewarm it feels. Even colder now that we are wet, the four of us shuffle back to the beach for another attempt at sleep.

I have to curl up in a fetal position to keep my teeth from chattering. The passage of time is a concept lost on me by this point; I only wish it were noon so I could go inside and sleep on a bed and wake up feeling...awake. Shortly after 10:00 AM the vans and buses arrive, and I explore the beach while talking with some friends. Other college kids have started venturing out from our condo and nearby condos and hotels. Already things are beginning to get a little rowdy. Welcome to spring break.

The rest of the morning cannot go by fast enough...by the time I think to put on sunscreen, Dan and Taylor have wandered off with Taylor's keys. Ryan and I sleep on our towels in the grass directly in front of the car, waiting for the key-bearers to return. An hour later when they show up I'm starting to feel the sunburn on my back, face, and shoulders. This is bad. We drive across the street (which, in case I haven't mentioned, also happens to be the Panama City Beach strip) to the convention center to sign in for the conference and pick up our condo keycards.

There are hundreds of students from schools across the country lined up ahead of us, so after finally pouring on some sunscreen I find myself a place in the shade. None of the sleep I've gotten today has been worthwhile, and I'm as exhausted as when we arrived – but that seems like little reason for stumbling around all day making myself feel worse. Dave, one of my roommates for the week, is already here by the convention center parking lot, so I roll my towel into a pillow and collapse in the grass nearby.

Shortly after noon Dave wakes me up. The registration line has gone down. We meet Dan, Taylor, and Ryan inside and slowly move along as the last of the stragglers file in behind us. After a very long twenty minutes, the five of us find our names on the list, hand over final payments for the condo, and take our keycards back across the strip.

At last, we can go inside and rest up before our busy week. Nobody seems to know where Brad (roommate #6) is at, but we'll be around the rest of the afternoon to let him in. We will be staying in the middle tower, and although it seems huge we quickly find our condo on the fifth floor.

The place is shockingly nice! We barely keep our jaws off the floor as we explore two fancy bedrooms with full baths attached to each, a well equipped and organized living room, and a kitchen including an oven, sink, microwave, and full-size refrigerator. Not to mention we have a balcony with a beautiful view of the beach and the Gulf!

Dan and Taylor offer to sleep on the convertible couch in the living room. That sounds good to Ryan and Dave; not only Ryan but also Dave and Brad are brothers in the fraternity Dan and Taylor are rushing. We decide that Ryan will share a room with Brad and I will be with Dave. Almost before my shoes have left my feet, I'm in bed and out like a light.

Around 4:30 in the afternoon a couple of the guys wake me up. Brad showed up sometime while I was sleeping. We're all pretty groggy and tired but I feel somewhat rested now. The six of us squeeze into Taylor's car and we make the five minute trip to the nearest grocery. Our shopping list is indefinite but simple: if you find something good and cheap, run it past the group. If at least two guys approve, toss it in the cart.

We get only several different things but we buy them in no-nonsense amounts. A huge box of generic corn flakes, two boxes of oatmeal packets, a dozen servings of ramen noodles, family size peanut butter, two loaves of bread, etc. The finest cheap food a gang of college males could hope to get their hands on.

That evening at the conference center the University group meets to discuss our schedule for the rest of the week. For the time being, my excitement about the days to follow remains outweighed by my exhaustion and the realization that my skin is thoroughly lobster-ized. The rest of the night is an uncomfortable blur; all I remember is explaining my sunburn to numerous concerned friends and going to bed early under a layer of aloe.

Sunday morning at 10:15 I wake to the sound of Dave in the adjacent bathroom's shower. I get out of bed soon after, shower, and apply the second in a long, mostly ineffective series of aloe treatments while microwaving a bowl of oatmeal. Dan and Taylor are still asleep but Dave, Brad, Ryan and I are in and out of the bathrooms and kitchen, enjoying the space and especially the fantastic view from our balcony. The comfortable, relaxed spring break atmosphere is settling here in Suite 507.

My oatmeal-and-banana breakfast is just what I need to start the day, and I go downstairs only a few minutes late to our worship service on west tower's patio. Taylor and Dan just woke up as I was eating but the other guys are already down here somewhere. The weather is gorgeous again and the sun is bright but I have my sunglasses on and am better prepared for the cool breeze. After a few good songs, I go back to the condo.

Dan and Taylor are going outside when they finish eating so I change into my swim trunks while waiting on a bowl of ramen noodles in the microwave. I eat my noodles plus a peanut butter & jelly sandwich, put on sunscreen with the guys (any decent sunscreen application requires a combined effort), and we head for the elevator.

The afternoon is long, sunny, and a lot of fun. I play some ultimate Frisbee with a big group of friends, laugh at Taylor and Dan when they let a couple girls bury them in the sand, and brave the Gulf again. Today we run in up to our chests...by the end of the week, we hope to actually *swim* in it.

Awhile past five o'clock we return from the hot tub to our room, saying goodbye to the girls as they continue upstairs to the seventh floor. I watch some of the basketball tournament with my roommates and call home when several of them leave for the funniest-named and therefore most wonderful grocery in the contiguous US (whose name I will not mention for scary copyright reasons, but maybe you can guess). I manage to sneak in a quick nap, then around 6:30 go back to the living room/dining room/kitchen for supper with Dan and Taylor.

At 7:00 we take the footbridge over the strip to the conference center for the first session of Big Break 2002. The praise and message are both good. This is the first time all the school groups attending the conference have been in the same place at once, and the turnout is impressive.

On our way out the MC tells us to each pick up a couple free books and a case of light-up rubber balls. Back at the condo, Dan, Taylor and I build a tower with our 91 bouncy balls. When the rest of the guys get home, we knock the ball-tower down and throw them at each other for a while.

That gets old after awhile (when we almost break a lamp), and one of Brad's friends comes over to see if we'd like to go for a swim. Those of us not still wearing them change back into swim trunks and go next door to the east tower's pool. The water is a lot warmer than what's in our pool, but still cool since it has been dark for several hours. After twenty minutes or so, swimming becomes too much work.

We hop in the hot tub to warm up before heading back upstairs. Several of the girls from the seventh floor come over shortly after we get back, and after we visit with them for a while all but Becca and her friend Lindsay leave. Dan and Taylor go for a walk on the beach with the two of them; I stay in to write.

On Tuesday, Brad gets the idea that we should make dinner for a group of girls whose room is below ours. He calls to extend our invitation and they agree...so it's off to the grocery once again. We buy chicken, pasta, salad, and fancy bread. Brad told the girls to be in our room at 7:00 for dinner – so we put a very large pot of water on the oven at 6:30. Only too late we realize it will take that much water a looong time to boil. At 6:37...

**Me:** So how long will the chicken take?

**Ryan:** Um – the chicken shouldn't take too long.

**Brad:** (laughs) We're all trying to pretend we know what we're talking about and none of us has a clue.

**Dave:** (also laughing) We're gonna call the girls at 7:00 and be like "could you come in ten minutes?" and then at 7:10 we'll tell them to come at 7:30—

**Brad:** Then at 7:30 we'll call and say, "We have a small contained fire. No, don't worry, currently it's only reached the kitchen and...half the living room."

**Dave:** Yeah, and at 7:40 we'll ask the girls, "Could you stop and pick up some burgers on your way? We'll pay you back. Next week."

We all laugh a lot. If only this made the water boil faster...someone mentions the theory that “a watched pot never boils,” so we look away from the oven for a couple minutes. This also fails to produce results. At quarter till seven Dave actually does call the girls...

**Dave:** Hey...this is Dave, you guys can take your time coming up here. Seven o'clock is so...soon and our pasta is so...hard. (laughs) Ok see you then. (to us) They'll be up shortly.

**Brad:** (standing at oven with clenched fists and wooden spoon in hand, threatening the water) Boil! Boil! Boil!

By 7:30 we are all set for our 7:00 dinner. The girls arrive, and we have a good meal of pasta, chicken, bread and salad. Far better than the food itself is the company – these girls are almost as much fun as my roommates! During our meal we play a party game from ‘Whose Line is it Anyway?’ where each of us has some bizarre quirk that everyone will have to guess at the end.

I, for instance, am reliving spring break 1986. At a random point while we are eating I stand, walk to the balcony, slide the door open, step outside and shout “SPRING BREAK '86, WOOOO!” at the top of my lungs. Dan is a fire safety inspector, continually voicing concern about all the hazards around the condo. Sarah speaks only in questions. Allison is a meteorologist (I do not catch on when she keeps talking about the weather). Dave is a secret agent. Dinner is a blast.

After dinner we talk and then play another funny game. A variation on charades, three people each round must leave the room while the rest of us plan a crazy scene. Someone is chosen to silently act out our scene for the first of the three ‘outsiders’ to watch. Outsider 1, in turn, acts the scene out for clueless Outsider 2. Finally, Outsider 3 is brought in and this poor individual must try to explain the scene after Outsider 2 (who saw only what was acted by Outsider 1...who in turn acted based only on what they saw from the original actor) imitates as closely as possible what they saw.

When you start with scenes that involve dwarves jumping into volcanoes and shipwrecked sailors turning into monkeys, you can imagine how the acting and interpretations are awfully humorous. This may be the most I've ever laughed in one evening.

Our entire spring break trip was sweet but Tuesday night was the highlight. The other days sort of ran together – meeting new people, visiting with friends, enjoying free time on the beach and in the condo. I used gallons of aloe, got several bushels of sand in my swim trunks, played hours of volleyball and even swam in the Gulf of Mexico for awhile on our last day in Florida.

The view from our room was unbelievable and the atmosphere was fun, but unquestionably it was the people around who made the trip great. Without classes or homework to run off to, I was able to relax and enjoy getting to know my roommates. I had a perfect chance to spend time with friends I'd met at school. And – even when Dan tried to climb the building and almost got us kicked out – I loved it.

The Panama City Beach trip went above and beyond expectations. There's no denying the greatness of a week away from school, a break from the stressful schedule, and a trip focused on fellowship and God. On top of all that, spring break does wonders for chopping up second semester. When we got home, I had only six weeks left in my first year of school!

## 17. Relationships, Love, and Lack Thereof

*I push through the door and shove my hands into the pockets of my jacket. Outside, the University is dark and lonely, silent but for a light rain on soggy grass and pavement. Earlier the chilly precipitation was just an annoyance, making walks to and from class seem twice as long as usual. Now, it is a reflection of my mood. This world is a cold, uncomfortable place and here I am, treading through it alone.*

*I saw her tonight. What a powerful little phrase, "I saw her." As if she were the only girl in the world, and the word "her" had no other purpose but to serve in place of one name. But that's how it sounds in my head. If I were to say just those three words to any of my close friends, they would know exactly the girl I was talking about. Do I know her? Not really, hardly at all as a matter of fact. Aside from her first name and which side of campus she lives on, I know nothing.*

*I've felt this way before. This dejected anger is all too familiar. Why would I expect anything to happen here? Why would I bother to go out of my way looking for an excuse to see her? Like so many of my plans, this one barely lasted long enough to fall apart. I can't play the dating game, and when I temporarily forget... the consequences are always the same. What's my problem, anyway? I'm too paranoid, no, too smart, to let my feelings get carried away. I've done this before, and I need to knock it off.*

*Including tonight I have talked to her not even half a dozen times, so this really shouldn't be a big deal. But that's not one of the stronger thoughts going through my head as I jaywalk across the flooded street to my dorm. I'm mad at myself for spending too many moments of my week looking forward to when I might see her. I feel stupid, as if I were fourteen again. It's frustrating that I'm always attracted to disinterested girls, but most of all I'm ticked at myself for being ticked.*

*Here I am swiping my ID at the door after another walk home by myself. In the stairwell there are guys at both floors, sitting on the steps with cell phones in hand. Both are slightly inebriated, both arguing with girlfriends at opposite ends whose tongues I suppose are equally dulled. Alone I push through the door into my corridor, shedding my wet jacket onto the floor when I reach my empty room.*

Enough... that's all the cheesy melodrama I can handle. Anyway, I'm not a popular guy where girls are concerned. Unless I knock something over, heads rarely turn when I walk into a room. Plus, my flirting skills became dated when I turned ten years old. I've looked too hard for relationships, and hurt too much upon finding nothing. I understand it but struggle in giving it up to God, and so have wasted a good deal of thought on the subject.

First observation: immature girls go for jerks. I've seen more examples than I would care to count. Even the smartest, most responsible high school girl is bound to do it. A lot of them seem to make a rule of dating only the most self-centered guys they can find. Why do girls like guys who are losers? I don't know. Worldly guys treat girls like crap because they know they can – if they are buff and outgoing and trendy, people pay attention to them. My guess is that some girls interpret this arrogance as confidence, and liberal doses of smooth talking on the guy's part take care of the rest.

But I have little self-assurance where girls are concerned, so through my teen years I grew used to not getting much attention and not having any idea how to acquire it. It wasn't until I was a junior that my luck appeared to change. I found myself attracted to a freshman, and – to my amazement – she was interested in me!

We dated, she broke up with me after a couple months, and I was pretty sure I would die. Only upon finding out how bad I was at it did I realize the extent of my romantic-ness. When I finally got over my first girlfriend, it was partly because I'd been spending time with a super cool girl in my own graduating class. The resulting relationship was similar, but with more of me trying to date her and less of her wanting to date me.

Preparing for college, I wondered if my female related ignorance would follow me to the University. Had I actually learned from my mistakes? Was I on the path to becoming a strong man of God, or was I still a clumsy, wandering kid? I know that my level of smooth-ness is low, cheerleaders are a bad idea, and there was probably

something else but I just forgot it. Would my relationships at college be different from the ones I wrecked in high school?

At summer orientation, I met a girl who for no particular reason seemed special. Also she was really attractive and outgoing. Oddly, I found the nerve to start a conversation with her as a massive group of us waited in line for lunch, but I could think of nothing to ask her except what type of extracurricular activities she was interested in.

Actually I think my exact words were, “So, do you play any sports or anything?” Real slick. Unable to resist my suave mannerisms, she responded by rattling off a list of sports she had played in high school. The conversation briefly continued.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Nope, no sports for me. I played reserve soccer a couple years but I was terrible. My brains are pretty much the only thing I’ve got,” oh crap, I thought. I must sound super nerdy – I was trying to avoid sounding stuck up by making fun of myself but I bet she missed it. I’m screwed, but might as well try to recover, “They’re giving me quite a bit of scholarship money actually, I was salutatorian and got a good ACT score.”

“Oh really, that’s cool. I’m coming in on a full ride, I did good on the standardized tests too,” she said. Her tone wasn’t rude at all; she was just carrying on her end of the conversation. “I was valedictorian of my class. I got... a 32 on the ACT. What’d you get?”

Dang it. I tried to be funny and that crashed like a granite parachute. I tried to impress her with my intelligence and she’s smarter than me. I joked, “Sheesh, now I feel stupid! I got a 31 and I thought that was pretty good, I’m impressed. Basically what you’re saying is that you’re great at everything.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” she said dryly but with a slight smile. She even had my sense of humor. Throughout the semester I ran into her a few times... I remember talking to her once or twice, but all I can recall is that I bungled around more than my fair share. She seemed cool but was more into partying than...well, anything else. And even if I wanted it to, that could never work.

After no fantastic start, I’ve made progress coping with girl-related stress. I have always tried so hard to make good impressions, and most of the time it doesn’t work. In high school, the cute girls went after the quarterback or the point guard or any male who spoke English and played a varsity sport. That changes in college, mostly because such a small percentage of students make varsity – instead, attractive college girls typically set their sights on the guys in popular fraternities.

Reminding yourself that most girls honestly aren’t worth the trouble takes a delicate balance of having your name forgotten, being ignored, and getting completely overlooked in favor of frat boys. Why should I consistently go out of my way to talk to a girl who shows little sign of interest in me?

I shouldn’t. Most of the times I find myself feeling depressed or stupid, a girl is involved. I need more confidence and patience, and am slowly finding these things through prayer and faith. I still have no clue what I’m doing, but at least I’ve started worrying about it less.

When I’m thinking straight I remember God has either an incredible woman or some variant of monastery life planned for me. In the past I looked too hard for Miss Right, sometimes thinking I’d found her when it should have been obvious I had not. God’s been working on me and I’m seeing improvements in my attitude.

I still notice the cool girls around me and I still try to get to know the ones I’m attracted to... just doing this is difficult enough. All I can do is ask God for a sense of direction, and focus on what I have instead of what I don’t. It’s a continuous struggle.

The moral of the story, gentlemen, is that you’ve got to stick to your guns. Yes, you will meet gorgeous females who will not notice you exist. Yes, you will stumble over words and embarrass yourself and wonder if you might be a little slow. But don’t snap and settle for some crazy girl because you are tired of being a good guy.

It’s true, respectful guys often get hosed when it comes to dating. We’re the ones who get to be *friends* with sweet girls while they wreck themselves over jerks. We’re the ones who get hurt for actually being sensitive, while

the guys who are good at pretending to be sensitive bounce from one girl to the next. If I were to make up a happy ending, I could direct an entire movie based on the awkwardly sappy scenes I've found myself in.

The big, shiny bright side: does any of that really matter? Nope. Any girl immature enough to put all her energy into being sexy and waste all her attention on losers is not worth your time. And unless 'dating' is your only long-term goal, waiting for the right one is a vital point. Besides...live in the past and you'll never grow, effectively crippling yourself for the future. I carry a little card in my wallet with James 1:5 on it, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all."

Do I lack wisdom? Without a doubt. What a time to learn and grow, while I'm a single college student with no girlfriend whose heart I must be watchful over. I can't think of a better opportunity to get closer to God and find how to become the man I'll be for the rest of my life. As childish as I've proven myself, time alone can be a great blessing. Whatever God's got planned for me will happen on His schedule, no matter how I try to force my own.

## 18. Finals (dun-dun-duuuuunnnn)

Academically, my first semester of college would hinge almost entirely on final exams. See, when you're in high school, finals seem like a big stressful deal but they don't amount to much. College finals, on the other hand – they mean a whole lot more than any high school test. We're talking a tough test that's quarter or a third of your grade.

My exam schedule definitely could have been worse. I only had finals in half my classes. My English and philosophy professors assigned papers instead, which I didn't mind so much since writing is kind of my thing. Microbiology and calculus, however, would close with huge cumulative tests.

I knew far in advance that finals week was going to be rough. Since I had slacked on my homework and not done so great on my tests, I'd have to prepare a lot for this last round of grades. I worried about my GPA. In order to keep my scholarships, I would need at least a 3.2 at the end of my second semester.

Even if I somehow got into easy classes for the spring, I would not be able to pull up a fifteen hour C average. One of four classes served as a bright spot – I knew I'd ace English unless I let a blind monkey type my final paper.

Unfortunately, that appeared to be the extent of the good news. My last grades in philosophy and microbiology, if I did respectably, would leave me sitting somewhere in low-B range. As to calculus...calculus was the source of my real stress. For the first time, I wondered if I could succeed in a class – and knew that if I failed the final exam, I would not.

It was more than scary to think I might have to retake the worst class I could imagine. I hated every moment spent in calculus; I might physically die if forced to sit through another semester. Not to mention an F would kill my GPA even worse than a D, my parents would be less than happy, and I would hate myself.

Though it was a painful process, I had tried to prepare for the regular tests. I passed two out of three, and the one I bombed would have been a passing grade with just one more point. The final would probably be passable, but certainly would not be easy – and the preparation would not be fun.

I would have to study like I'd never studied before. I continued attending study sessions and yes, even class. The day before my exam I went to study with my friend Kaitlan – a math phenom who was already finishing calc II. She helped a lot and gave me her old notes and note cards to look over. I felt a little better about my situation...but not better enough to avoid worrying myself into a headache that day.

I had to pass calculus. There were no other options; I had to pass or I may as well drop out of school. Unfortunately, I also had to sleep that Sunday afternoon, or I would have puked. Kaitlan had just given me so much helpful material, and now I hardly had any time to use it. The final, to my benefit, wasn't until 5:30 on Monday evening. I pulled down the shade and slept my headache away, then studied off and on throughout Monday.

That afternoon I spent several hours studying with my friend Scottie from downstairs. He hated calculus too but was good at math – and with the curve in his section, he had a B. My section, on the other hand, included a small handful of geniuses who crippled the curve for everyone else. That curve was my grade's lifeblood.

While I studied, I tried to assure myself everything would be fine. Needless to say, finals week was one filled with more prayer than usual – like most people I know, I'm bad about talking to God a lot more when I need something.

I had only failed one of the regular exams, and they were probably almost as bad as the final would be. I studied a lot more for the final and besides, much of it was review. With God ultimately in charge (even of calculus), I had no justifiable reason to worry... but as is too often the case, this barely slowed the worries down.

I'd avoided failing by an average of 10 points on the previous three tests. I got 70% of the quiz points for the semester and 100% on the final project. Surely I would pass calculus, I told myself. I'd have to really botch the final to fail. And there was the rub: who was to say I wouldn't really botch the final? I couldn't be sure, so the sick, frightening doubt remained. If my professor happened to be in a bad mood when he graded the exams, I might be done for.

I walked to my calc exam feeling nauseated and more nervous than I've ever felt on account of school. Fifty-three came, and the final was unsurprisingly brutal. Since I had studied more it didn't seem as bad as the others (it appeared to be written only half in Greek), but it was terrible nonetheless.

Each and every problem, even if I understood the idea behind it, was difficult and complicated. The professor must have either a) thought we were geniuses or b) wanted us to fail. I stared at my desk knowing if I didn't write down enough answer-resembling junk on the packet in front of me, I would fail calculus.

On a scale of one to ten, with ten being so stressed you actually explode, I spent about a month hovering over 7 thanks to calculus. But I never expected microbiology to be awful...after all, only half of the material would be new. The rest would be review, re-worded questions from old tests and quizzes.

Even the new stuff should be ok because of how recently we'd covered it in class. Unlike calculus, I *understood* what my professors were saying in MBZ. On the same Stressed to The Point of Explosion scale, I'd say I went into my MBZ final at a modest 4. It would definitely be bearable, but I would have to study a good deal more than I'm used to.

I'd studied for an hour and a half at most in preparation for my two regular microbiology tests. My grades were average, which I thought was good considering all the pre-med honors kids in my class. Since I was expecting a D in calculus, I couldn't help but think how nice it would be to get a B in my science class. I promised myself I would study a lot...but I doubt if I looked over my notes or worked on practice quizzes for more than two hours. The hint of daredevil in me wouldn't let me do much more, knowing the test was multiple choice.

The exam started at 7:30 AM, and I fully expected to spend the entire two-hour period wading through it. Walking fifteen minutes in the cold rain to take a final before the sun came up was not fun but I tried to be positive. After all, once I was finished I could go home for break!

Surprisingly, the MBZ final was less confusing than previous tests. And as much as I'd studied, I hardly had to guess at all! It was considerably more enjoyable walking *back* to my dorm than it had been walking to the science building. I was done with my first semester of college, nearly dried off, and playing videogames with Mark and Scottie by 8:45.

My final MBZ grade was an even more welcome surprise than the exam itself. I checked my grades online the first day they were posted – I got a B in my science class! Don't ask how I did it, but I got a B in a pre-med weedout class full of perfectionist honors students. Especially combined with my A in English, such a respectable microbiology grade looked awful nice. That left calculus and philosophy, and only one of those had me worried...

My philosophy professor had told everyone in the class to arrange a meeting with him during exam week so he could tell us our final grades. I half expected to get in an argument with him and then fail the class. But I was amazed when I showed up to talk with him and he was polite – even friendly. This was a professor who had always disagreed with me, destroyed my papers, and who appeared to thoroughly dislike me.

But at this final meeting, he was smiling and reasonable and genuinely nice. He told me my grade...here the good news continues. I got a B+, having expected to get a B- at best. Again my pessimism was proven wrong – and I couldn't have been wrong at a better time.

Calculus, to no one's surprise, was less forgiving. Adding injury to injury, and insult to that, it was weeks before I saw my score. I spent all of Christmas break only hoping for a D. All my other professors posted the grades to the University website exactly when they were *supposed* to. But in the row labeled 'Calculus I,' my eyes were met with a big, fat...N?

What did N mean?! I flipped out, because one of my high school teachers told me N was probably short for "no credit." I called the University registrar's office that afternoon and was relieved to find that in fact N meant "no grade submitted" – which was better than certain failure, but did not get me out of the woods.

I re-checked every day over break, my heart pausing each time I pulled up the webpage. Would it be a D, or an F? Not until the second week OF THE NEXT SEMESTER did I learn my grade. I was at the registrar's office turning in a drop class form, and decided to check while I was there.

The lady looked up my grades on her computer, then went to a box in the back of the room and pulled out a sheet of paper. She brought it to her desk near the counter and I could see that one row had been highlighted. It was a bubble sheet – the grades from my calculus section.

There was one student for whom no grade had been marked, and of course whose name was in the far left column? Mine. The woman called my professor and told him about the problem and when she hung up informed me he would “send in a supplemental grade form” and I would see my grade in a few days.

I thanked her, told her I guessed that meant I got to spend a few more days praying for a D-, and turned to leave. She stopped me, said, “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but he told me...” and then reluctantly repeated what my professor had said over the phone. Let’s just say D became my favorite letter!

So, I’d worried too much about my grades. Do my first semester grades put a bit of extra pressure on me for the semesters to follow? Sure – most of my scholarships require a 3.0 grade point average and my first semester left me sitting at 2.6. Losing scholarships is not an option...but I will be fine.

I’d intended to get the worst out of the way early, and it was bad – but what else should a person expect from “the worst?” Your first semester is supposed to be a transition, and I did pretty well in some tough courses. I’m not ecstatic with my results, but I think God may be using that to teach me to relax. How much better a person would I be if I had a 4.0?

## 19. You *can* go home again

I've said it before, but I'll say it again: I love my family, my friends, and the century-old house in the country where I grew up. Had I allowed myself to think about it while I was getting used to my temporary residence first semester, I would've really missed being home. I might have even cried or something.

But the fact of the matter is simple: you can't stay at home forever. Because I'm not built for manual labor and my career goals involve higher aspirations than assistant manager at the local TacoHut, I've always known that after high school it'd be time to go to college. Nowadays it's the natural progression for those of us blessed enough to have that step as an option.

Most people fear that once they've adjusted to college, it will feel weird going back home. I myself was afraid of this, and didn't like the idea since I was happy with the way things were. Would I grow distant from my parents? Would I get bored with my old friends? I found these things hard to believe since I have always been close to my friends and family.

Still, many adults who had been to college and back told me things would "never be the same," and I took their word for it. After all, they knew better than me – I'd never lived away from home or even been on a trip where I didn't know at least three other people.

I realized when I left for school that I should wait a long time before coming home to visit. I knew that the more often I came back, the more trouble I would have being on my own at school. I didn't at all like the idea of running home every weekend.

Some of my friends did this, and I felt bad for them. I felt even worse for their parents, driving hours upon hours every weekend so their little one could be comfortable for a couple days. A month and a half went by before my parents came to take me home for the first time; I was happy with myself for toughing it out.

My parents and sisters helped a lot. They came down to visit a couple weeks after classes began, took me out to lunch and bought me some things I needed from the store. It's always good to have someone drive you around and take you shopping, and even nicer to eat a steak – but the best part was getting to see my dad, mom, and little sisters.

I'll admit it was strange, but not in a bad way. Things seemed different because I hadn't seen my family in weeks; for so long I had been around them every day, and suddenly it was a big deal spending the afternoon together. I was sad when they left but only for a little while. I knew that I would talk to them, I'd see them again soon enough, and life would go on.

I realized then, when my desire to run away from all my classes and go back home lasted only a moment, that I was set. That's why, several weeks later, I went home for the first time knowing that I was golden. I'd made it. I enjoyed the time with my family and wished the weekend were longer, but went back to school refreshed.

I had gotten a break from the noise and the drunks and the constant reminders of class and schoolwork. The next weekend, homecoming, would be a different test. What would it be like going back to a high school football game now that I had graduated? And more importantly, what if my friends or I had already changed and would no longer be close?

I tried to get mom and dad to pick me up from school at noon on the big Friday. They knew I had calculus at 2:00 but I explained to them that I hadn't missed a class, the professor never took attendance, and since I barely understood him there was no reason for me to go anyway. Being annoyingly responsible parents, they wouldn't budge. Mom laughed at my attempted weaseling and said they'd be there at 3:00.

I skipped calculus anyway. I'd spent an hour and a half in study session the night before – there really was no reason to go to class. It worked out well because this gave me time to catch up a little on my science homework, switch the sheets on my bed (since they hadn't been washed for two weeks and everyone knows how much moms love doing laundry), and throw together the things I'd be taking home.

Even the car ride with my parents was nice. We'd been talking on the phone once in awhile, but nothing compares to a face-to-face conversation. I told funny stories about stuff that had happened with classes, friends, and

my roommate over the past week, and they caught me up on how my sisters were doing at school and in basketball. Although a small argument ensued after I told them I might be failing calculus, we had pleasant conversation for almost the entire trip.

Walking from the garage into my house for maybe the fourth time in as many weeks was a strange feeling. Dad had put new linoleum in the kitchen and they had put up new wallpaper, but otherwise everything looked the same. I wouldn't describe it as an uncomfortable feeling, just a strange one – I knew that I'd be home for two nights and then back at school.

It was as if my parents' house was merely a bed & breakfast, and the dorm at school was my permanent residence. Soon home felt like home again, but it was weird waking up in my bed Sunday morning knowing I would spend the coming night back in my dorm room. It made me feel... displaced. If my parents' home wasn't "home," then what was?

Seeing old friends, on the other hand, was not strange at all. Since I talk to nearly everyone once in awhile online, I knew the important stuff that was going on in their lives at school. Only a few people had changed in the month we'd all been away, and those who changed in college had already been acting different the summer after graduation. For the most part, I think everyone knew what to expect from everyone else – there were no major surprises.

Shortly after I got home, a couple of the guys came over so we could go to the football game together. The three-minute drive to the high school was as short as usual, and we hadn't been away long enough for the place to look much different. Yes, it was the same old place...but it was a new feeling, to be parking in the pothole-filled, familiar lot as visitors. I remembered when I was a little kid going to high school events with my parents, intimidated by the big kids. Suddenly here I was, a visiting graduate. Bizarre.

I paid even less attention to the game than I had while in high school. Two of my best friends had played football and now that they were gone I didn't have much reason to watch. Besides, there were too many people around that I hadn't seen for months. It was good to say hi and catch up on what everybody had been up to, and nice to know some of the underclassmen were happy to see me. I certainly didn't talk to everyone, but that was fine because I ran into most of the people I'd hoped to see.

I was glad I went home for the football game. Although I felt a little out of place, I got to visit with friends I wouldn't otherwise have seen for a few more months. And yes, I was even glad to see some of my teachers and talk to many of the parents I know. It's a real blessing to have such a place to come back to. Like most good things, the game went by too fast but it was enough to make the trip home more worthwhile.

New friends are great, and I've met some cool people at school, but few things compete with relationships based on years of shared experiences. A group of friends more solid than mine would be hard to find, and although we keep in touch it's tough making time to see one another. I hung out with my friends the weekend I was back for homecoming...but as I said, those two days flew past. Our real chances to see each other came over Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks.

I'm easily entertained. I think it's because I am pretty boring, but oh well! I'm perfectly happy playing cards, watching a movie, or just talking about nothing and joking around. The ideal party, if you ask me, is one with a dozen friends, volleyball, and a Nintendo.

I love volleyball and it's one of very few sports that I'm good at, shooting/racing/punching people in a game is a blast, and of course being around cool guys and girls makes anything better. And the beautiful thing about being easily entertained is I don't really mind if it's too cold for volleyball and nobody feels like videogames. We've always been good at improvisation.

Sometimes, the dumbest little things are the best. One morning at about 4:15 my friend Byron and I were leaving our buddy Tim's house. We had played Nintendo until it was late and then talked until it was much later. Thus far, nothing about the night was out of the ordinary. It was great to have a serious conversation with old

friends and of course fun to play games, but we're used to doing that. Little did we know, the morning was about to take an unexpected turn. An unexpected and HORRIFYING turn (dramatic pause and scary music)!

The time came for Tim to kick us out, and Byron and I continued talking as we walked to our cars. I had parked close to the front door but Byron's car was about 50 yards away, nearer the road. Looking up, we noticed taillights at the end of the driveway. What in the world?

Maybe Tim's house was getting toilet-papered. He does live in a small forest, and the road is hardly visible from the house. This makes his place an easy target, all the more popular because he has younger sisters and with young sisters come annoying little boyfriends. We had seen some high school guys toilet-papering on our way into town, but that was hours earlier. Who toilet-papers someone at 4:00 in the morning?

Suddenly we heard a metallic sound. The mailbox! That was it; it must have been a couple burnout thugs pounding Tim's mailbox. All of us live in the country and therefore passionately detest the scumbags who spend their weekends smashing mailboxes. Indecisive, we argued for a second about running out to the road or chasing them in the car. They were taking an awful long time to bash a mailbox...but maybe they were doped up or something.

Byron looked ready to dash for the road as I opened the door and leaned into the car quietly. Not thinking, I put the keys in the ignition with the door still open. The buzzing "Hey dummy, the keys are in the ignition" sound had never been so loud. I shook my head for being careless, then quickly climbed in and pulled the door gently shut. Byron stood at the passenger door, trying to decide whether to go for his car or not.

"If they do something to my car they're gonna die. They're leaving! Oh man!" he blurted as he jumped in. He threw my backpack from the passenger seat into the back as I hit the lights and switched off the heater, hoping the '84 Tempo would start.

Sure enough, taillights flickered behind trees as the thugs turned around. It was cold but I primed the engine just right and it whined into action when I twisted the key. I swung around in the drive, trying to avoid the trees and remember all the stumps. Gravel scattered into the yard as I punched it out the driveway. My door rattled violently over every bump. I hadn't shut it tight before, so now I swung it open and slammed it as the ground flickered past. No need to slow down. I barely stopped Byron from jumping out.

"Wait, let me get my car!" he said as he leaned out his open door into space.

"No time, I'll drop you off back here." I told him as we reached the road, "They went right, didn't they?"

They did, and I instinctively looked for incoming traffic although it was four in the morning. I hit the gas and we were on the road. The taillights were fading in the distance, but in less than 30 seconds we were up around 65. Yes, this was a true American performance car.

They turned at the next intersection and I wondered why a carload of vandals was traveling so slowly. I hit the turn signal thanks to another ingrained habit; we laughed as I shut it back off. Just down the road ahead of us was our prey, pulled off to the left. They had stopped in a driveway and seemed to be waiting for me to catch up.

"Hey there Hazardry McHazardlights," Byron said. A good observation; the car's hazard lights sure were flashing. What was going on here?

The vandals were sitting on the opposite side of the road with the flashers on. We slowed to pass, hoping we wouldn't get blasted as we went by. Did they want to fight? All I had in the trunk were old golf clubs (and the biggest wood was headless from one too many horrible swings). What if these dudes we were chasing weren't 15 or 16, but 20...what then?

And what if they weren't on mind-dulling pot, but some sort of crazy murderer amphetamines? I might be able to run over a couple of them but if there were more than two it was over. Byron and I may have seen our last sunrise.

We were silent as I passed the car. Both of us held our breath, craned our necks and saw – a middle-aged man in a rusted hatchback, delivering newspapers. So much for suspense. We were looking for action and what we got was a weird look from a sleepy newspaper guy. So much for teaching some property destroying hoods a lesson! Oh

well, the chase was exciting and I'm a horrible fighter anyway. Who the heck delivers papers at four in the morning? That guy, apparently.

Assuming the craziness had ended, we wandered unfamiliar roads on the way back to Tim's house...only to be assaulted by A RACCOON! Byron jumped and screamed as it lunged at us from the passenger-side ditch. It was a fat, crazed raccoon and for a second its glowing eyes looked creepy. I swerved away but judging from the sound its head made as it connected with the rear wheel, I'd say the humans won that confrontation. What a night.

You really can go home again, if you want to. It feels weird at first – and for understandable reasons – but simply because things are different doesn't mean they are bad. Seeing loved ones only once in awhile makes you appreciate them even more: an ice cream cake reading “Merry Christmas, You Guys” and a cheesy movie with Chiv, Matt and Jonathan becomes the highlight of your weekend. Time with mom, dad and your little sisters no longer seems annoying. Having dinner prepared for you and a car to drive and a big room to sleep in reveals beyond a doubt how unjustifiably fortunate you have always been.

No matter how far I move on, I will always have something good to come back to. I thank God for all these things and I do my best to enjoy them fully. My attitude is the only thing that could separate me from my family and old friends; be it due to academic arrogance, lack of responsibility, or whatever. None of my relationships are perfect and there may be rough times ahead...but so far, so good. I pray the same for anyone at or nearing college age.

## 20. Return

Returning to school after Christmas break was not nearly as difficult as moving in for the first time. It was, however, harder than I'd expected. My three weeks at home went quick – I watched a couple basketball games, visited old teachers, saw friends still in high school, and spent a lot of time with my family. It took only a few days to get used to sleeping in, having no homework, and eating meals made especially for me at least three times a week.

As a result, I can see how it would be easier leaving for school if I weren't so blessed at home. If I didn't feel completely safe or comfortable in my house, it wouldn't be *uncomfortable* spending months at a time in school. If I didn't have close, dependable friends at home to laugh with, hang out with, and have an all-around great time with, it wouldn't bother me to see them only periodically. But I am fortunate enough to have all of these things, so even though I like the University it's tough to return after being home awhile. That discomfort quickly passes, though... I feel safe and have friends at school, too.

The difference between moving in initially and moving back after Christmas is familiarity. After a whole semester on campus you know the buildings and streets, feel relaxed in your room – and, most importantly, you have friends. Once my mom and dad helped me unload my junk back into the tiny dorm room, I walked them out to the car to say goodbye.

Before we even made it to the parking lot, I saw my friend Mark, unpacking his own things from the car. My parents left, but Mark was still there, and I helped as he and his mom unloaded and got the room re-situated. The toughest part of the move this time around was fitting everything in my room again.

I didn't realize I had brought back so much clothes. I had gotten new stuff for Christmas...not a massive amount, but when combined with everything mom had washed while I was home it was almost impossible to find room for it all. I've got two decent-sized drawers, one small drawer, and a respectable closet.

I don't own a whole heck of a lot of clothes, but they barely fit in the space I have. It was frustrating moving things around and wondering if it all would fit and realizing I had brought back way too many pairs of socks. I packed everything away and got it all done at once. Only a small feat, but when I had finished it was a relief.

I waited until my roommate left and I could push my chair back into the center of the room, then I started fighting with my computer cables. There is just enough space for my CD holder, razor, cologne and headphones on top of my desk once the monitor, speakers, and keyboard are in place; the subwoofer and power strip make for a crowd underneath. After ten minutes everything was plugged in and ready for action, and again I stood victorious. But not before hitting my head on the bottom of the desk.

All these things that kept me happily busy following move-in first semester were mere annoyances the second time around. For instance, it doesn't take long to learn that no matter how well you think you did buying books, there's no way you'll have everything you need. Instead of paying for my help building a new garage over break, mom and dad bought my books when they brought me back to school.

I was surprised when the bill was only \$270, having paid over \$375 first semester. Then the first day of class came along, and I spent a day running back and forth between bookstores, returning incorrect volumes and shelling out another \$120 to get the right ones. So much for slipping by easily (now I use half.com and that saves a TON of money)!

Finding classes the first couple days can also be... interesting. Sometimes the room is listed wrong on your schedule, sometimes the department switches rooms at the last second. All I know is that one day I sat in the wrong room for about 45 minutes. I was so sure I had found the right place!

There was a notice on the door telling all communication students to go to a different building, and since I was there for English I assumed I should stay and wait. Then a girl came in and I talked to her a little, but after we sat around for awhile nobody else showed up.

Finally a friend of hers arrived, and we triple-checked the door only to come across a sign we'd all somehow missed. A big, orange, clearly labeled sheet of paper, telling English students the room and building we were

*supposed to* be in. By that time the class should have already started, but we speed-walked to the right place and somehow beat the professor by a minute or two.

This is one simple but relevant example of how things turn out well in the end, no matter what dumb mistake you might have made to mess them up. Worrying about being 30 seconds late, torturing yourself over every detail of a lecture or a conversation...worrying about *anything*, for that matter, never helps.

I get a little stressed, when I'm using the restroom and a drunk girl walks in – and uses the stall right next to me. It bothers me when the guy in the room below mine plays “Rape Me” (I'm dead serious, it's a song...aside from all the illegal drugs it was the dumbest thing Nirvana ever did) at max volume several times a day. But none of these things could really harm me, so why worry about them? I've been working harder on leaving things to God instead of dragging them around myself. It's not easy for someone stuck on self-control.

On that note: I've caught myself throughout this little venture trying too hard to be funny, which probably means I've been even more sarcastic than usual. I don't want to leave you with the impression that college is too stressful or too hard or just altogether bad, because it's really not.

I made great new friends, learned to get along with drunk people, and improved on poor conversation skills. I related to and became comfortable with my roommate, laughed a lot with the hilarious guys in my corridor...even had time for some videogames! And, I got decent grades in my first semester classes. College is a big responsibility, but so is life. If your heart is in the right place, you can truly enjoy both.

Spring semester promises to be better than my first. I didn't accidentally enroll in any pre-med classes, I don't have philosophy, and I will never have to take calculus again. I'm registered for a basic geology class, a history of religion class, two 100-level English courses, and an honors section of political science. Classes will be easier, I have friends to hang out with and lots more people to meet, and I don't have to worry about most of the issues that seemed so enormous only months ago.

The transition has been made and while it won't be all smooth sailing from here, there is no reason why college should not grow progressively more enjoyable as I continue building healthy relationships and growing closer to God. One day I was talking with Mark at lunch and told him I had finished the first draft of my manuscript.

“You're stopping halfway. You should wait until the summer so you can cover a whole year,” he suggested.

“Nah. It's about adjusting and stuff; second semester is just more of the same. It'd be redundant,” I told him (as you may have noticed, this was before I decided to write about spring break). We'll see...

*Now*, revising for the fourth time as a junior, I have to mention a big thing I've learned: we humans can handle nearly anything the world throws at us. We're not expected to be perfect but we're built to be awful hardy and flexible. With your face to the light via faith in God, you cannot lose. Yes, many aspects of freshman year are scary and difficult. But I survived easily, and I am no extraordinary guy. Sure, education is important, but how terrible it would be to stress non-stop for four years only to look back and say “college was depressing.”

Worrying does nothing, loving means risking, and succeeding means first determining which things are worth having. Life – “growing up” – is not a ten-step program where everyone goes through the same bland process...over time you find out what you can and can't do, what you do and don't like. Most of the time I've got no clue what I should be doing with my life or where I'm headed, but this is where faith comes in.

Not knowing what's in store (on rare days when I have a decent attitude about it) is what makes life exciting, and no amount of planning will jam the pieces into place. Seeking a life that glorifies God is a long and sometimes ugly trail, but the first steps are the hardest. And when the alternative is a glittering road to loneliness, what a payoff for the effort!

College is not all that encouraging, but realizing the need to live humbly in dependence is **good**. I am learning to relax, to forgive, and to enjoy myself, all without compromising what is important – God, family, friends. Time to wrap this thing up.

### ...sellout...

I'm a sellout. I may seem dumb for admitting this, but there's no sense trying to weasel around it. I'm sold on God, His plan, and His love for all Creation. Tell yourself it's because I've been conditioned by years of Protestant church, but I believe in joy and grace and can't imagine we'd experience either if we were simply monkeys with highly evolved brains. Critics, say what you will, but I'm more inclined to believe there's a God with a purpose than I am to believe humanity is the result of millions of random mutations. As a rational explanation, God wins over nature any day.

I'm no photo-op wonderboy, but I am a happy person. When I find myself struggling against stubbornness and a lack of confidence, I remember to take a step back. In our secular world it's hard, but I'm learning to appreciate God's love and presence in my life. I attempt to study and be responsible, while trying not to forget I'll be ok regardless of what happens in school. I try to pray and read the Bible, trusting in my heart that I'm not alone. Although never as much as I ought to, I appreciate and look forward to the important things: evenings with my family, time with true and sincere friends.

Happiness is a state of mind but a deeper, consistent joy comes from knowing your debts have been paid off. In spite of my bad habits and perpetual shortcomings, Jesus allows me to be a free man. My mistakes should kill me but thanks to Him they will not...so why live every moment as if I'm dying? God holds a clean slate for me, as for anyone who chooses to answer His call and invite Jesus in. This is a radical idea, but one that makes perfect sense when you stop to think about it. It's the stopping, unfortunately, that can appear impossible.

When I'm home on break, in the country and away from the lights of College-town, all I have to do is look up for a reminder of God's power. Sometimes on a clear night I will stand in the driveway for ten minutes after coming home from a party or a movie, looking at the stars like a little kid. I can only identify two or three constellations, but friendly old Orion is usually there to see. I think about burning elements and solar systems as my pupils adjust for more light. Can you honestly look at a clear night sky and conclude that the universe is uncreated randomness?

If I stare for long enough I can pick out distant points of white between the easily visible ones, an endless stretch of specks shining off in space. The universe makes me feel tiny, yet simultaneously less worried about meaningless things and determined to make the greatest positive impact I can. This is another reason I am a Christian: I believe in good, and alone I could never be good enough. No matter how much we learn at college, much is left unexplained by an academic world itself frustrated with a lack of philosophical answers.

Christianity is not meant to be an idea or even a religion, by most definitions of the word. Christianity is a daily pursuit of God that is made possible through Jesus – a relationship that, like any other, we'll screw up. But more so than any other relationship, mine with God is one in which I find amazing forgiveness and room for growth. Sometimes at school this makes me feel like a stranger in a place where so many of the people seem distant. Surrounded by proud emptiness and students being molded into bitter adults, I try to be a good friend and influence, despite my poor qualifications for both.

It's sad to see so many people who think I'm a loser for avoiding things they will eventually regret. I believe most of these freshmen are exactly like me: guys and girls with some promising character. People who are or at least have the potential to be loving and dependable and *real*. But so many of us struggle to see who we are, drifting in an ocean of bad relationships and false ideals and overwhelming pressure to succeed. The water's a mess and everywhere are sparkling distractions that lead us straight for the undertow. God's grace is my paddle – how can I share it?

See, I realize that throughout this process I have gotten sidetracked. I wanted to make you laugh with this story or that, thought such-and-such would get my point across. I am a decent writer but I am not great; I am smart but am no genius. And this may be too little too late, but the intended point of the forty thousand or so words you've been reading is important. I have probably missed it by going too deep in philosophical bumbblings, or

focusing on the wrong points, or just using stupid wording. The bottom line is my need for Jesus – without him I would not have written this book, and would not have reason for...well, anything.

I have emphasized particular arguments because I know myself: I am stubborn, would like to know everything, hate to feel as though I'm selling out. I get the impression that people in general are the same way. But when it comes down to it, you're selling out no matter where you stand. When I put faith in Jesus I acknowledge that my hopes for a "good life" require Him; I admit that I'm a mess and can accomplish nothing good without Him. Yes, this is weak – I am weak. But do not ignore Christianity as an alternative for weaklings who can't get by on their own... no one can get by on their own.

This is what kills me about our self-righteous culture: we are so proud and outwardly independent, too stubborn to admit defeat. But because we truly feel incomplete, we spend our lives scrambling for something to fill the gap. Perfect grades are hard and surprisingly unsatisfying when obtained, so we decide school won't do it. Most of us are talented enough that if we wanted to, we could pretend promotions or a successful business would earn us enough money and influence to do the trick. When guy's nights out and random hookups turn out to be a bust we might settle down to raise a family...and I haven't tried, but I get the feeling that won't work either.

Speeding along with the trendy, trashed on the weekends, find-your-own truth mindset requires putting your **faith** in the things of this world. You and I know we make decisions that are wrong. That's why we get defensive about certain habits and justify what's obviously unhealthy. We are not perfect, but we hope everything will be ok – regardless of whether that hope is backed by God, money, or something else. Believing in God makes you a wimp...but believe in something *less* than God, and you can pass yourself off as strong. Does that make even the remotest shred of sense? I think many people know the Truth deep down but dismiss it because going with traffic is the easy thing to do.

As a result of counting on things that aren't true, we develop serious trust issues. We become spiritually frustrated and often begin doubting that God even exists. It seems to make sense to believe in only what you can see and feel, especially when you've been deeply hurt. I know I'm blessed to have grown up in a loving home, to have supportive friends: I've been given little reason for radical doubt. Yet mostly, I think, people simply want to have fun. Beer commercials, dumb pop stars, and hundreds of other sources confuse us as to where real happiness might be found. We become so sold on material trash and distorted ideas of 'having a good time' that they control us.

If you want instant gratification, there are plenty of places to find it – especially while you're in college. This is a point I hope I have successfully attacked without sounding like a completely judgmental jerk. Beer is just beer but it is a big factor in today's college illusion: when the excitement runs out, suck it up and save your cash for a few days and start all over Wednesday night. If you've got money and decent looks (or just lots of money), life seems good. Or heck, forget all that and go to a frat party. Almost everyone gets in, and you can have uninhibited "fun" for free. Problem solved.

But what will happen when graduation rolls around? Older folks always tell us to appreciate every day, every hour that we have on Earth. When you're a kid it's impossible to believe life will fly by. Then gradually, as you grow up, you start to see it. The weeks seem to shorten. Your days get more and more full of work and play and relationships, until everything becomes a blur. Life is not easy, but with distractions we can easily pretend.

Our time here passes like a jet, and our fate depends on who's in the pilot seat – seriously consider that relying on God might be wiser than trying to fly yourself. We might recognize enough controls to do many things, but nothing we do alone will bring about permanently pleasing results.

It's not a complicated decision: bow to our Captain, take off alone, or linger in fear and 'safety' on the ground. When trying to play pilot yourself, look forward to crashing due to lack of training and unfriendly weather. And if you hang around on the runway... you'll probably get jacked in the face by a landing gear. The Captain who built the skies certainly will not disappoint, if only we'd let him steer. Are you preparing for an adulthood above the clouds, or on the pavement?

**Recommended Reading:**

*(all better than this, I promise!)*

The Bible, written by a bunch of people and available in dozens of translations. I like the New International Version, Revised Standard Version, and New Living Translation. The King James Version is great when you're in an educated sort of mood.

Mere Christianity and The Great Divorce, by C.S. Lewis. Also, pretty much everything else he ever wrote.

The Sacred Romance, by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge.

Don't Waste Your Life, by John Piper.

The Knowledge of the Holy, by A.W. Tozer.

Darwin's Black Box, by Michael Behe.

Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley.

New And Collected Poems, by Richard Wilbur.

*All of the above available at your local bookstore or a number of online retailers.*

...and, if you are so odd that you just can't get enough of my writing:

[www.thathero.com](http://www.thathero.com)

My essays, poetry, and such in the "thoughts" section may interest you. Thanks for reading!