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The Hopes and Fears of Post-9/11 Years

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In 1998 Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton wrote in *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student* that the current college generation they had studied was “wearied by the enormous pressure they face economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. At the same time, they are energized by a desire to enjoy the good life and make their corner of the world a better place. This is a generation in which hope and fear are colliding” (17).

We have recently graduated a class of college seniors for most of whom the events of September 11, 2001 occurred within a few weeks of their arrival on campus. If hope and fear were colliding in 1998, one might suppose that on September 11 fear must have won a decisive victory and that current college students—including those in Valparaiso University’s honors college, Christ College—would have turned decisively toward those outlooks and behaviors associated with social anxiety and dread of the future: disillusionment, defensiveness, caution, and above all a quest for security and a safe “haven in a heartless world.”

Yet this is by no means the case. Many of our “best and brightest” students, while decisively and perhaps permanently sobered by the terrible terrorist attack on the United States and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, have not been individually or collectively traumatized into passive or fortress-building psychological or social postures. Instead, many seem to cherish those core values of faith, family, friendship, community, and democratic liberty that sustained them in the days and weeks following September 11, values that they see as extremely precious even as they appear more fragile and vulnerable than ever before. And they look for ways to sustain and build those connections in their own lives and in the lives of others even as they struggle with the issues of career, intimate relationships, and social autonomy that Jeffrey Jensen Arnett of the University of Maryland at College Park identified with the stage of “emerging adulthood” in an *American Psychologist* article, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from Late Teens Through the Twenties.”

While it would be an exaggeration to say that hope has won some kind of strategic victory over fear, there is among a great many of our honors students—largely Midwestern, middle-class, seriously religious, and strongly connected to family—a sense of earnestness and openness and even innocence that seeks to affirm and reassert their core values in a social and cultural environment that seems less dismissive of them. As one of our junior students told us, “While there are many reasons to

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be anxious, there is a deep commitment among honors students to improve the world in whatever way each can." Reports of the "death of irony" in the wake of September 11 may have been exaggerated, but it does appear that students living outside the centers of ironic and self-consciously avant-garde attitudes are less inclined to take their cues from the media and other sources and more inclined to look toward local exemplars of what it means to lead a significant life.

The most visible manifestation of these inclinations is the continuing intensification of the impulse toward personal volunteering and social service, both at home and abroad. Programs that Christ College affirms or actively supports, like the deployment of pre-medical arts students during their spring break to medical clinics in Central America, are highly popular and over-subscribed. Many students look for volunteer or internship opportunities that will actively aid underserved communities while testing their own vocations for health professions, church-related vocations, or areas of technology and science that seem to address social needs. One of last year's seniors performed a summer internship to develop environmentally sound dairy farming and is now taking a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship to the University of Minnesota where he will pursue environmental engineering. The student-led World Relief Campaigns sponsored by Valparaiso University's chapel have grown more extensive and sophisticated in their conception and public visibility, addressing forms of Third World development that are recognized in places like the *Wall Street Journal* in Roger Thurow's April 2005 article on famine relief, "In Battling Hunger, a New Advance: Peanut-Butter Paste."

Whether such far-visioned manifestations of outreach among largely tradition-oriented honors students represents only a temporary blip or prefigures a wider social development is hard to say. Only a small minority of students actively seek professional careers designed to address directly the grand international and national problems of terrorism and war—though it may be revealing that one of our talented seniors has won the highly competitive German Chancellor Scholarship to pursue Middle Eastern and Arabic studies in Berlin, with the ultimate aim of improving America's cultural and political posture in the Middle East. More students wrestle with finding what they call a "balance" between career goals, social responsibility, and personal satisfactions. And a small minority seem actively to shrink from the pressures and burdens that press upon them from "the world," in the form of "the job market," unsettled personal relationships, escapist distractions, parents, and college professors and advisors. For that small number of students, the cross-currents of hope and fear that Levine and Cureton identified have grown even stronger, producing either an uncertainty bordering on paralysis or weathervane behavior that turns with any momentarily prevailing wind.

It can also be said that college honors students, like American young people generally, are no longer as distinctively segregated by their age cohort as generations past from the wider experiences of their culture, community, or nation. Many of the markers that once set youth apart from their elders, like music and pop culture, are now part of American culture generally, and what divisions remain run more along lines of class or ideology or race than of age. In my experience, more students actively welcome intelligent adult engagement with their intellectual, moral, and religious

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lives than at any time in the recent past. They no longer feel that adults are interfering or intruding on their freedom; rather, they seek wise support, guidance, and assistance in an uncertain world. Almost all our students are enthusiastic about the depth of personal engagement with religious and philosophical texts in our first-year program (they read Aristotle, the Gospels, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Mencius, and Kant, among others). As Alexander Astin of UCLA has recently said, "There are large numbers of students who are involved in spiritual and religious issues and who are trying to figure out what life is all about and what matters to them. We need to be much more creative in finding ways to encourage that exploration." (Bartlett A40)

It is therefore a good time to be in places of higher education that are still committed to the liberal arts and to the development of intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtues. We have an opportunity with today's honors students to develop academic and co-curricular programs that can speak to their deep issues and real concerns while preparing them for productive lives. Most college-age students are surely still in a stage of "emerging adulthood," with all the attendant moral and social issues. But the days of viewing them as somehow "other," residents of a foreign territory distinct from the time and culture we all share, seem to be fading if they have not already passed.

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