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Yesterday I was helping a CSB student move into the dorms. I saw on a bulletin board a Senior Bucket List. There were just a few items that seniors had posted, which they plan to do this year. One was to do the Chapel walk at St. John's, the walk from the beach to Stella Maris Chapel across the lake. Another goal was to achieve a certain GPA. A third was to get involved in volunteer activities. Somehow these three things are emblematic to me of what your college years ought to be like.

I'll start with the Chapel walk. It brought to mind a discussion a few years ago led by Abbot John from St John's Abbey. The discussion was about environmental stewardship. He described a sort of meditation in which we return to the same place in nature again and again and see how that place changes throughout the year and how it stays the same. There was an idea of using that experience to become more rooted in your surroundings and connected to your environment and community. But one would also keep returning to that place year after year, using the visit to measure the change in ourselves since the last time we have seen that place looking like that: covered in snow or in leaves of a certain colour. I'd like you to think about finding a place, maybe the Chapel Walk, or the St Ben's woods or a park in St. Joe, to use in that way.

You are going to change. You are going to learn and grow. That's not to say that the core part of you will change but right now you are a picture in soft focus; you are fuzzy around the edges and you will sharpen up over the next four years. As faculty we are always amazed to see that transformation. Given where you are sitting right now, one of the most important changes will be an intellectual one. You have a fair amount of control over that process. If you want to learn and grow then one of the most important things you can do is face challenges. Set sights on a certain GPA maybe but I think more importantly, try to stretch yourself. If you don't know anything about philosophy then this is your chance to take a philosophy course. And in general, no matter what you are doing, welcome challenges. Don't avoid the hard stuff. The hard stuff is exercise. It's what leads to a stronger, healthier mind.

I saw a facebook meme recently. It was a quote from Neil DeGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist. He was probably doing the same thing that I'm trying to do now. I don't have the exact quote but I have the idea. Choosing to do challenging work in college is helpful to you and to society. It helps you to develop value to your community, by giving you skills other people don't have, but they need you to have those skills as part of the community. We are all interdependent; we share our skills to move forward.

So part of the purpose of going to college is to become a more useful person to your community. And again, given where you are sitting today, that ought to include some sort of service, of giving to others. There are many ways that you can do that. Maybe you will travel to South America and start a clinic in the slums of a major city but it doesn't have to be anything that exotic. Start small. Practice. Build a habit of service. Make it part of your regular routine. Maybe it will be as simple as picking up a grocery list from an old woman in St. Joseph and doing her shopping every week, and just as importantly, sitting down with her for half an hour and talking about her week or her garden or what things were like when she was your age.

If you do these three things: if you develop a sense of place here, if you look for academic challenges, if you work on a habit of giving to your community, then you will make the most of your college years, and we will be very proud of the person you become.