

“There Was a Child Went Forth”:

College, Receptivity and Understanding

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*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.*

Walt Whitman’s poetry has always spoken to me for the way he paints the world as full of wonder, just like the child in this poem, who encounters plants and animals, people and places, and they all “become part of him.” Everything holds some sort of surprise. Everything he experiences, he absorbs. It soaks in. It becomes part of him.

This is what I wish for you as you begin your college career: I wish for you to soak up your experiences of the world around you, to make them part of you.

I won’t go through the whole poem, but I want to swim around in a couple of the ideas in these first four lines.

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon...*

I urge you to always **look** around you and take in your surroundings. I mean this quite literally, of course: **look** and see. But use your other senses, too. Every day there will be something new about these beautiful campuses. The leaves will change. The clouds will change. The bells will call the hour. Flowers and snow will come and go; rain will bring the smell of green and pavement.

I also mean this “looking” somewhat less tangibly: looking and seeing are metaphors for *curiosity* and *understanding*. You’ve chosen to get a liberal arts education, which means you’ll be taking some classes that aren’t directly related to your major or anything you’ll necessarily view as particularly “useful.” But screw “useful.” Look and see: be curious. You might as well. You have to take these classes anyway, and it’ll be a lot more fun if you dive in and make the questions in each class your own.

Plus, this is where we move from **looking** to **becoming**. “*The first object he looked upon, that object he became.*” How can you become, as the child does, the early lilacs, the third-month lambs, or the “old drunkard staggering home from the outhouse of the tavern whence he had lately risen”? — Actually, that last one is pretty straightforward. But don’t do that too much. — Become instead the poet in your English classes, the cells in your biology microscope, the notes in your music performances.

But how? How do you become a lilac or a poem? You don’t, of course. So what is Whitman’s child doing when he “becomes” these things? I think he’s taking each thing he encounters seriously and

on its own terms. Not because it's useful to him, or threatening to him. It's a way of encountering the world with openness and a virtue that philosopher Michael Slote calls *receptivity*, which I'll gloss as the idea that we put ourselves second for a little while and not process everything through the lens of ourselves.

A favorite professor of mine used to tell his classes that in time, you'd only remember three things from college. I haven't yet reached the point of remembering *only* three things, but I know what my three things are. The first one is seeing the Christ Chapel angel. Christ Chapel is the church at the center of the Gustavus Adolphus College campus.

It was said that in certain cloud conditions, the lights that illuminated the chapel spire at night would form an angel shape on the clouds. One winter night, I was crossing campus to go to bed after spending the evening in my friends' room. I looked up, and there it was: an angel on the clouds. I stopped and breathed. And in that moment, the sight was primary, and I was secondary. Perhaps, for a moment, you could say I "became" the night, the chapel, the angel.

For me, the joy of college was to encounter every new idea as absolutely convincing, and then meeting the next one and thinking that was right too, and then having to figure out how they could both be right because they weren't compatible. I wouldn't have framed it this way at the time, but I was exercising receptivity: each new idea was interesting or exciting in its own right, and I needed to fit it all together.

This kind of synthesis reminds me of the second of my three lasting college memories: a performance by Gustavus alum, and now Grammy-winning jazz musician Kurt Elling. In it I heard references to all kinds of other music, including Mozart—and the energy! Elling's music was excited to exist. It took in the world around it, continuous with everything that went into it, but also entirely new. I still carry the imprint of that concert with me some twenty-five years later.

"And that object became part of him"

After Whitman's child in the poem "becomes" the objects he looks upon, the objects in turn become part of him. Becoming is a two-way process: by moving out of ourselves and receiving the world as it is, we expand our understanding of not only the world, but ourselves.

My favorite illustration of this comes from my third lasting college memory. I attended a talk by astronaut and physician Story Musgrave, who also, by the way, has seven graduate degrees in a wide variety of fields, including a master's degree in literature. (Liberal arts FTW!) I remember very little about the content of the talk. The thing I remember is the opening slide. It was a picture of a brown-skinned child crouched on a beach at the edge of some still water, reaching toward their reflection. Musgrave explained that he always opens his talks with that slide. To him, it represents simultaneously reaching outward and reaching inward: that whenever we're learning about the world around us, we're *also* always learning about ourselves. That idea, that image, is the picture that Whitman's poem puts into words.

What I think is remarkable about these two unnamed children, Whitman's and Musgrave's, is that they look into the world and *receive* it. What receptivity does is set our "dear selves" in the background so that each encounter is an attempt to fit the self into the world, not to fit the world into the self.

*“And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years”*

Not everything leaves a lasting impression, nor should it. Becoming is a constant process; we can't possibly hang onto everything. Still, we do hang on to some things, and every encounter can shape us, if only for a bit.

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.*

So I urge you to be receptive to the world of objects and ideas around you. I call on you to have encounters in which you fit yourself into the world as it is and not in which you ask the world to fit itself into you. I hope you will begin to view the world as a place of wonder. Because you never know when the questions you ask, the knowledge you gain, the objects you free yourself to become—whether lilacs, cells, or music notes—will become part of you, just as they became part of the child, as Whitman describes at the end of the poem: *“These became part of that child who went forth every day, and / who now goes, and will always go forth every day.”*