

Arthur Holmes wrote an excellent book entitled, *The Idea of a Christian College*, and in his chapter on the Liberal Arts, he told a story that we are all probably familiar with already. A typical college student—let’s call her Jane—comes walking into a professor’s office for advice about what classes to take next semester. Jane couldn’t figure out what to take in the spring. Should she take a chemistry class, or literature? Should she knock out that fine arts requirement, or go for accounting instead? Jane is a psychology major, so she is wondering if she should do experimental psychology, or another kind of class, and in the midst of all this confusion, she blurts out the question, “What am I going to *do* with all these classes, anyway? What *use* does literature, or history, or chemistry, have in the *real* world, in my future life?”

The professor leaned back in his chair, and did not reply by defending the usefulness of philosophy, or the benefit of chemistry. Instead, he suggested simply, “You need to ask a different question.” Why? The world is dynamic, inconstant, rapidly changing. If your main motivation for entering college is to find a job, to gain marketable skills, then you may find yourself disappointed in four years. According to the former U.S. Secretary of Education, the top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 did not even exist in 2004. And the U.S. Department of Labor estimates that today’s learner will have 10-14 jobs by the age of 38! Beyond this, we ourselves—our personalities, desires, relationships—are always changing. The professor leaned in, and gave Jane a simple piece of advice: “Instead of asking, ‘What will I *do* with this class?’” he said, “You should ask, what will this class do to me?”

At this moment, attending Invitation to Excellence and in the midst of your college

choice, I am guessing you might be like Jane. You are sitting down with your parents, your guidance counselor, your friends, and you are probably asking, what university should I attend? Which one would best help me in the *real* world—which one would place me on the best career path? And while these questions should be asked, whether x college has your desired major, or y college has a pre-med program, it seems Arthur Holmes has good advice for us all: we should also be asking, what would attending this university do to me? How would it change me, and who would I become as a person as a result of being educated here?

When I reflect upon my Baylor experience with this question in mind—who did I become by attending Baylor? What did this university do to me?—I find much to say. And I hope my reflections upon this question can be of help to you, not only this weekend as you see what Baylor has to offer you, but also this year as you decide which college is the best fit for you.

When I reflect upon the person I became due to my four years at Baylor, I realize that I was shaped in numerous ways. I grew emotionally due to the community of good friends, caring professors, and a supportive housing structure. I grew in my ethical understanding and in my political engagement, making my day-to-day decisions and my decisions at the voting booth in light of deeply held commitments which I hammered out both in the classroom and outside of it. Luckily, I did not grow physically – that is, I escaped the freshman 15!—but that is because I had the opportunity at Baylor to engage in hobbies and interests that kept me physically active—like rock climbing and learning to waltz, rumba, and cha-cha in a social dance class. But for the remainder of my time tonight I wish to focus on three aspects that were central to my development as a person, and that I'm guessing are very important to you as well as you think about your university options. Namely, how did an education at Baylor shape me intellectually, socially, and spiritually.

Intellectually, I arrived at Baylor with a healthy appetite for learning and a lot of intellectual curiosity. I'm sure this is how you are as well—you have probably taken on difficult high school classes with eagerness, and as you're sitting here today, I know you've excelled in these challenges. My initial expectation of college was that it would take me to the next level and foster growth in my thinking, my writing, my speaking. In these ways, the education at Baylor well fit my needs. Although I knew that I wanted to be a political science major, and I greatly enjoyed my early political science classes, I also found myself drawn, somewhat unexpectedly, to the classes I was taking in the Honors Program, especially those in Great Texts of the Western Tradition. And it is at this point that my initial expectations were well exceeded.

You see, I expected to like political science classes. I came to Baylor with a number of high AP scores and some dual credit, so I got an early start on classes in my major. And my plan was to become a lawyer, a politician, or an investigative journalist who specialized in politics. What I hadn't expected was for my perspective on this career path to change. When I began taking courses in Great Texts of the Western Tradition, my imagination grew as well as my intellect. I became enamored not only with how our political system worked, but how political systems in the world worked. I became enchanted not only with the American system of justice, but the broader question of, "What *is* Justice?" And I felt enriched by the conversations I was having in my Great Texts and Political Science classes, to the point where I desired to keep pursuing these questions beyond my undergraduate life.

Through this process, I became fascinated specifically with Renaissance Europe. I remember a particular day in which I came to the realization that seismic revolutions in thinking, in the areas of science, religion, and politics, had all occurred within the same century. I became fascinated with the question of why Copernicus challenged the traditional view of the rotation of

the planets in the same century that Luther protested the practices of the Church in the same century that Machiavelli questioned the politics of princely rule. And in the midst of this growing interest, I especially got caught up with the story of England, and with its seventeenth-century political revolutions that paved the way for American revolutionary thought. At Baylor, I found the support to sustain and further my interest. Dr. Dwight Allman in the Political Science department agreed to be my honors college faculty mentor, and he helped me design an honors project that explored the work of the political philosopher, John Locke. At the same time, I had the opportunity to participate in lively conversations and debates about texts with my peers and interact meaningfully with my professors, for my upper-level seminars in Political Science and Great Texts tended to have fewer than 15 people in them. In all these ways, I was hooked – and this passion has never subsided. It continues to guide my graduate work, and I believe it will also shape my professional career.

As you consider your college options this year, I encourage you to think seriously about how much individual attention you will be able to receive in the university. How large will your classes be? Will you have the opportunity to really know your professors and to work with them one-on-one? And finally, and most importantly, does the college offer a wide variety of creative courses—courses that could spark a passion in you that you may not even know you have.

Socially, I couldn't wait to go to college. I'm sure many of you feel the same way, and I very much hope that while in college you won't be all work and no play. To illustrate how Baylor impacted me socially, I wish to tell a story about one seemingly ordinary Saturday in October of my junior year, which became extraordinary. That morning I rolled out of bed around 8am and donned the paint-stained t-shirt, ragged blue jeans, and dirty old tennis shoes I wore each week to the Habitat 4 Humanity worksite. I loved seeing the weekly progress of the house

we were erecting. My earlier jobs onsite had included raising the frame and hammering the double top plate layer that connected the wall segments, but I knew this week we would be nailing tar paper onto the roof in preparation for shingles. It would be hard, sweaty work, but I tended to love it anyway—not only because I was learning new skills and getting out into the fresh air, but also because I got to work alongside the family that would eventually call this house a home. I got to be part of a community that cared about their neighbors in a tangible way, and that could make the dream of home ownership and stable neighborhoods a reality. (If you do decide to attend Baylor next year, I highly encourage you to join Baylor’s Habitat for Humanity club. It is a great Baylor tradition, and indeed, Baylor is recognized by Habitat for Humanity International as having the first campus chapter of Habitat in the world).

That evening, and after a shower of course, I rode down to Floyd Casey Stadium in a bright gold jersey, nervous and excited because we would be playing football against Texas A&M, our biggest rivals. We had lost miserably to the Aggies the two years before, and I, along with everyone else, wanted desperately to win this year. The game began sluggishly for us, with the Aggies scoring two field goals and a touchdown in the first half, as our offense scored a meager field goal in reply. Half time came and went, and many of us worried that this may become a blowout, until the third quarter when a touchdown and field goal let us even the score, 13 to 13. The fourth quarter was eventful – A&M scored, we answered, A&M scored again, and with three minutes left, we answered. The clock ran out with a tie, 27 to 27, and before we knew it, we were headed into overtime. The Aggies got the ball first, and in six plays they made it to the end zone and kicked the extra point. We were nervous – we had to make this drive count. The Bears slowly worked their way down the 25 yards, and with each gain the excitement in the crowd grew palpable. On the big screens, announcers were warning that the NCAA had ruled

that students were not allowed to come onto the field after the game, but the talk in the crowd was that, if we were victorious, we must storm the field. A minute later, we got the touchdown we had all been aching for. Students started surging towards the railings as Baylor prepared for its extra point, and a student in the front row who had a small marker board held it up with a clear message: it read “GOALPOST”, and had an arrow pointing toward the south end of the stadium. At that moment, our coach made a daring decision: Baylor would go for the two point conversion. We stood huddled in the front rows of the stadium in silence, all praying that our coach’s gutsy call would pay off. And it did. Before we knew it, we were jumping onto the field and racing towards the south goalpost. About 8 men stood guard around the post, but as they became surrounded by hundreds of students, they moved out of the way. Students climbed up the bars of the goal post and held onto it until it snapped at the base, and we paraded around the stadium lifting the post over our heads and singing “That Good Ole’ Baylor Line” as loudly as we could. Helped by a police escort, I and about thirty other students actually managed to lug the goal post the three miles to Baylor campus – which won’t be a problem for future students with the exciting plans to build a new stadium just across the Brazos! We deposited the goal post at the front door of our president’s house. It was midnight when we finally made it there, and as we had paraded through campus we had gathered dozens of students in the celebration. Robert Sloan, our then president, stepped outside his front door and greeted us with a huge smile. He could have been angry – Baylor would be fined for violating NCAA regulations, and he would have to pay for a new goal post. But instead, he gave a simple speech: I am thrilled to see you so excited, and I promise, this is the future of Baylor football. As we now know, his words were prophetic

In these ways, that Saturday was truly extraordinary, but in other ways, that day was

almost like every other Saturday at Baylor. That is because a university such as Baylor is more than its classrooms. It is also its commitments to social justice and the community, as well as its clubs, organizations, and sports. At Baylor I found the opportunity to pursue social justice in Waco – to build up homes and relationships with my local community – but I also found the opportunity to tear down goal posts.

Spiritually, Baylor is truly unique. I didn't realize this fully until I left Baylor, but now I see how my understanding of the Bible, my appreciation of the Christian tradition, and my personal growth as a Christian all flourished during my years at Baylor, and it continues to enrich my life. There is a worry amongst the wider academy that integrating faith with learning threatens academic freedom. That it will make one closed-minded or irrational. But having now taught in secular classrooms, I have realized that I actually had more academic freedom at a faith-based institution. Here's a brief example.

Last year I had a very difficult time teaching Medieval History at Johns Hopkins University. This is not because the students at Hopkins are dim-witted– heaven knows most of them are very smart – and it's not because they didn't care. It was because the Middle Ages is full of incredible stories which are very hard to fathom as a secular person. One such story is that of St. Francis receiving the stigmata, or wounds of Christ. Medieval writers claim that, late in his life, Francis retired to solitude and prayer in the wilderness, and during this time, he prayed fervently that he might fully imitate Christ. The writers explain that God granted Francis's prayer and allowed him to imitate Christ even in his wounds from the crucifixion. Thus, they said Francis miraculously received open, bleeding wounds on his hands, his feet, and his side.

In a secular classroom, it is difficult to know what to do with this story. My students suggested that, perhaps Francis had cut himself, either because he became so crazy that he didn't

realize he was doing it, or he did it purposefully to deceive his followers. Other students said, no, it was his *followers* that must have fabricated the story, or maybe they thought they saw something but they really didn't. Still others said, it never really happened, the writers made up the whole story, and the tale grew as it was passed down through generations. And finally, a slightly more charitable group said, well maybe it was psychosomatic—maybe Francis so *believed* he received the miracle, his body produced the effects.

In a Baylor classroom, there is one more possible solution to this question: maybe the stigmata was a miracle. I am not going to argue this evening that it is definitely so, nor at Baylor would you necessarily be expected to think that it did happen. But within the Baylor classroom, such a question could be debated freely and without ridicule. I have come to realize what a gift it was to learn about the Christian tradition in the Baylor classroom. For, we could discuss Augustine with peers and professors who actually took seriously his claim that the human heart is restless until it rests in God. We could learn about Luther not just as a historical actor, but as a continuing influence on the faith. And we could learn to recognize God in his good creation. I could realize, in the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that

...Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries... (*Aurora Leigh*)

Baylor shaped me to be the person who actively pursues faith and reason, and who doesn't understand this dual pursuit as antagonistic, but as mutually enriching. For this, I am truly indebted.

In all these ways, Baylor shaped me intellectually, socially, and spiritually. I gained a vigorous intellectual training, that has not only propelled me through Queen's University, Cambridge, and Johns Hopkins, but which has also sustained me because I was able to discover a

field I am truly passionate about. Socially, Baylor fostered in me interests as well as convictions, and I, like many Baylor graduates, grew a heart for social justice. I also still watch every Baylor football game with my husband, who, incidentally, I met at Baylor. And spiritually, my life and my relationship with God were deepened at Baylor. Having been trained to engage critically and seriously with the Bible and Christian tradition, I can now turn to this tradition as a rich resource for my personal, as well as my academic life.

While I have discussed each of these areas separately, I hope it has become apparent that they are interwoven, in the Baylor mission as well as in my life. As you visit universities this Fall, as you make this difficult decision, I encourage you: ask not what you can *do* with your university education, but what it will do to you. I am beyond grateful for what Baylor did to me.