

The Best Years of Your Life

By Janet Norem

Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Ephesians 5:15-17.

Many of us laugh when someone tells us, “Your college years are the best years of your life.” But consider the uniqueness of your time as a student. The decisions you make during college probably affect the rest of your life more than decision made during any other time. Careers are determined and mates are found. “Success” in college often determines “success” in later life.

The situation is especially unique for Christian students. These students aren’t tied to a rigid nine-to-five schedule, a freedom which is ideal for evangelism and discipleship. They can literally have a worldwide impact by reaching internationals. Many have the summer months free to go on short term missions. Truly the privilege of attending a college or university is a stewardship that is not to be taken lightly. “To whom much is given, much will be required.” How can we make the most of these years?

Although Chrissy Calebite (not her real name) became a Christian at the age of 15, she experienced little spiritual growth until college. There she joined a Bible study in her dorm which helped her learn basic principles of walking with God. Soon Chrissy was attending meetings held by the same college campus group that sponsored the dorm Bible study. By her sophomore year she was involved in evangelism and discipleship with the goal of reaching other students for Christ. The following year she attended a conference that focused on the need to bring the gospel to other parts of the world. This made sense, so Chrissy said to herself, “I will become a missionary after I graduate.”

One of the things Chrissy learned from her campus fellowship was the importance of the local church. Unfortunately Sunday morning services conflicted with track practice. Undaunted, Chrissy found a church with a Sunday evening service. She usually arrived five minutes late, sat in the back, and left in a cloud of dust after the final “amen.”

Ministry activities, sports and – oh yes – school made for a tight schedule. In order to lighten her load Chrissy took electives like Theatre (movie watching), Our Earth (rocks for jocks), and Rudiments of Music (after eight years of piano lessons). She hated languages and fulfilled the foreign language requirement by taking two Spanish courses.

Amazingly, after four years Chrissy’s credits added up to the point where she was awarded her degree, a B.S. in General Science. By this time, she was thinking seriously about the mission field. “But,” Chrissy reasoned, “what good is a B.S. in General Science? I’ll need something relevant to a third-world country.” So she stayed in school for two more years for a degree in agriculture, taking out two student loans in the process.

Agriculture did appear to be an important discipline internationally, as evidenced by the number of international students in Chrissy’s classes. There was the Kenyan who sat in the front row in her soils class and wrote down every word the professor said. And there was the girl from Sri Lanka who sat beside Chrissy in botany class. It would have been nice to get to know them better, but there seemed to be no time.

What do you think? Did Chrissy Calebite use her college years wisely in light of her desire to serve as a missionary?

Chrissy soon found out. Her first two years after college were difficult ones because she had to pay off school debts. She felt acutely her lack of a solid church base. "Is this your first time here?" some would ask her although she'd been going to the same church for five years. When she finally did go overseas it was the first time she had studied a language seriously. It was also her first extended exposure to people of another culture.

Chrissy learned her lesson too late, but you can learn from her mistakes. If you are in school and believe God may be calling you to overseas ministry, you should begin to prepare now. Here are some concrete steps you can take while in school to be more effective after graduation, either as a goer or a sender.

- **Become vitally involved in a local church.** There is a big difference between church attendance and church involvement. Involvement means commitment to serve and build relationships with members of the church. Since this requires time, it may mean an adjustment of priorities. Ask God for wisdom.
- **Use electives wisely.** Take some courses in anthropology, sociology, or comparative religions. Language courses are helpful even if you won't be using the same language on the mission field that you studied in college.
- **Consider studying abroad for a year.** This is an excellent way to get cross-cultural training. Also, exchange students can study in countries that prohibit missionary activity. They may have opportunities to witness as they build friendships with other students.
- **Begin to reach out to international students.** This can give you experience in cross-cultural ministry before you head overseas. It can also give you a vision for a particular group of people. If you befriend a number of students from Outer Yax, for example, when you go to Outer Yax as a missionary you will already know some Outer Yaxians.
- **Avoid debts.** In some instances it may be better to stay at home and work for a summer instead of going on an overseas project. In my (whoops, I mean Chrissy's) case, I was probably more acceptable to most mission agencies with one degree than I am now with two degrees and a large school debt.
- **Get involved in a campus ministry group.** Evangelism, discipleship, leading Bible studies, etc. are excellent training. These ministries also enable you to be directly involved in reaching the world while you're in school.

So what if you've already graduated and didn't use those college years strategically? Relax. Forget what lies behind and press forward to what lies ahead. God can still use you.

Chrissy Calebite – whoops – Janet Norem spent two years in Zaire with the Peace Corps and later served as Follow-up Coordinator for Caleb Project.

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