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09/2017 | Monthly Topic

New beginnings of college

by Jennifer Hall

As I prepare for my first year of college, I'm very excited for all the new things to come. But I'm also feeling overwhelmed. Not only am I starting a new chapter, but I'm also seeing my friends go their separate ways. And I've come to the realization that my education at this university is not only an incredible opportunity, it will be very expensive. The phrase "student loans" makes my head hurt.

Even though I'm anxious about this transition, I am trying not to be afraid. Thankfully there are others—other freshmen—who feel the same way I do. At one moment, I'm really excited—and the next moment, I start to freak out. And then I have to remind myself that this is really happening.

Even though I'm anxious, I remember that God is always going with me and I don't need to worry. "I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

Here are some things I've learned as I prepare to leave my friends and family for college.

Saying goodbye is tough

This can be one of the most difficult things we do. When we start new beginnings, we have to accept that we won't be seeing the same group of friends or teachers anymore. Even though I'll be attending college only an hour away from my parents' home, some of my friends are going to schools far away.

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I want to tell anybody reading this that it is OK to cry about this. This is an emotional time and if your friends are anything like mine (adventurous, goofy, talented and amazing), then it's understandable to shed a few tears – or even more.

The best thing to do is keep in touch with your friends and pray for them. Pray that they'll achieve the dreams they've been wanting to come true, and ask them to pray for you too.

Preparing yourself

Now that you've said goodbye to many of your friends, it's time to get yourself ready. How did I prepare for school? I went shopping for supplies! (I'll be living on campus so this involved a few trips.) It's daunting to realize that I needed all these new things for my first year.

All this preparation reminds me of getting a new gadget without a manual – so you have to play with it until something happens.

For me, school is that new gadget. Even though I don't have an instruction manual, I need to just dive in and get going.

Talk to God

Growing up in church, I learned the stories of Jesus helping others. There's the ongoing theme of our Lord telling us not to be afraid, for "I am with you" (Isaiah 43:5; Mark 28:20). After hearing this so many times, I've come to believe it. No matter the situation, good or bad, Jesus will be there for me. We can all trust in God as we go forth in our new journey in college.

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If you are content, give God the praise and glory. And when you are worried or just not feeling good, talk to God. Prayer is one of the most powerful things we can do in this lifetime, and as a witness, the power of prayer works.

Discussion questions:

1. What does starting a new beginning mean to you?
2. How has God helped you through your hardships?
3. What are some of the ways you have prepared for school? Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually?

Closing prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you. Thank you for getting me this far in my journey. I have come such a long way and I know that I could not have gotten through this without you. Lord, I still look to you for guidance as so many are starting a new journey of college. Please watch over my loved ones and my friends as they encounter new obstacles in their lives. I know I serve an amazing God and will always be your humble servant. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Jennifer Hall graduated high school this spring. This past summer, She worked on staff of Women of the ELCA for the triennial gathering. She is now attending Temple University in Philadelphia and studying psychology.

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The last first day

by Victoria Contreras

Over the past year, as I look forward to graduation day, I've gotten used to hearing the question, "So, what's the plan after college?" I know people mean well, but after a while, it's easy to hear it as a polite way to ask, "So, what are you going to do with your life?"

Naturally, I respond with some well-crafted answer that reflects my persistence and determination to pursue a successful career— an answer that really makes them believe that I know what I'm doing. The problem is, I don't know what I'm doing.

You see, so far, the student life has been predictable to the point where even the unpredictable has become predictable. Three years in, I know what to expect. I know when my next paper is due. I know that my friends are only a few steps away. I know who this version of myself is.

In college, there are almost no unknowns. But, in life— now, that's different story.

My time at Northwestern has become comfortable, and the idea of leaving and not coming back is unnerving. What will my place be out in the real world? Who will I be? What am I going to do with my life?!

I began to question myself: "Didn't you just spend three years working toward a degree in psychology so you could become a therapist? Isn't that what you want? What do you mean you don't know what you're doing?"

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But then I realized what happened: Life happened. I'm not the same person I was when I showed up for freshman year. I've changed. Since then, I have set aside the shyness of my childhood, and because of that, I got to know so many wonderful people.

I've gotten to know myself through my experiences, too. My resident-assistant work brought me a love for building community. My professors helped cultivate a passion for diversity, social justice and inclusion. And the arrival of my little sister – now almost two – reminded me of the importance of family.

Acknowledging change within myself was simply the first step in tackling this fear of the unknown. The next step was to figure out what I really wanted out of life.

When I say I don't know what I'm doing, it doesn't mean I don't know what I want to do. But there are so many career paths I could take, and I fear that by choosing one, I'll limit myself down the road.

That fear followed me into my summer internship, so I made a point of asking the professionals who crossed my path about their journeys after college. I wanted to know how they got to where they are today.

To my surprise, they didn't know what they were doing back then either, and some even told me that they still don't. Some people had studied something in college that they never ended up using; some found a passion, years after college, that they decided to pursue further; and some people are still building and even changing their career paths today. The people I admired as examples of what "getting it right" looks like turned out to be just like me!

Did that mean I was getting it right?

I shared my fear with one woman. I told her that I was struggling with choosing a path for myself because I didn't want to look back years later and realize I picked the wrong one. As I spoke, she looked at me compassionately, as if she had experienced and conquered the same fear, and said that no matter what I choose to do after college, as long as I put my faith in God and God's plan for me, I will end up where I am meant to be.

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That one piece of advice has made an enormous difference for me. It made me acknowledge that I don't have all the answers, and that's all right. I don't need to. What is meant to be will work itself out. As long as I pursue opportunities that make me happy and serve others, I can't go wrong.

September 19, 2017, will be my last first day of school, the first day of my senior year of college. It's bittersweet, but I plan to enjoy it. With graduation approaching, I need to appreciate every one of these moments like it's my last – because this time it will be. I look forward to starting this new year at ease with myself, my abilities, and my future. Senior year, I'm comin' at ya!

Discussion questions:

1. How do you grapple with an unknown future?
2. What does your path look like?
3. Where are you on this path and how do you lean on your faith throughout your journey?
4. What is the best piece of advice someone has given you about your future?

Closing prayer:

I put my faith in you and the path you have laid out before me. I may walk without the knowledge of where I'm headed, but I know that I walk with you. Amen.

Victoria Contreras is a senior at Northwestern University studying psychology, legal studies, and gender studies.