“WERE YOU AS SCARED AS I AM?”

This is the question that was put to my recent college graduate son by his friend, who came by the house for one last visit before heading off to college for the second half of his senior year. How different this was, I thought, from the feelings I had in college thirty-some years ago. I was sad that the proverbial best four years of my life were coming to a close. I was perplexed about whether I should leave college without rekindling the flame lit by my first love that glorious summer after freshman year or strike out into the world untethered by a long-term relationship. But “scared”? No way.

While the time I spent in college may have been my halcyon days, the world my classmates and I were graduating into was hardly a haven of peace and prosperity. Our first year we had gotten our draft lottery numbers, even while US intervention in Vietnam was nearing its ignoble ending. Sophomore year I had waited on long gas lines to fill my sometimes-reliable VW Bug, enduring the oil crisis of 1973. By my senior year, the economy was so sluggish that it would soon help bring about the end of the Ford presidency. In 1976, shortly after I graduated from college, President Carter admitted at his inaugural speech, “We have learned that … even our great nation has its recognized limits, and that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems.” So the mid-1970s were hardly a high-water mark in US history. In retrospect, it certainly seems like the stage was set for diminished expectations. Yet I do not recall feeling that way at all. What I was feeling was a sense of accomplishment. My parents had not been able to attend college. My dad left school after seventh grade to help support his parents during the Great Depression. My mom’s dad did not think a college education befit- ted a woman, so both of my parents missed out on the opportunity they had provided for me. As far as I was concerned, what had been planned had come to pass as expected.

I don’t recall being overly consumed about what I was going to do with my life either. My friends and I hardly talked about the future at all. I presumed that my college education would open doors for me that had not been available to either of my parents. These opportunites would undoubtedly be mine by virtue of my education, my work ethic, and the high expectations my parents instilled in me. Certainly, I was naïve; yet, strangely, I felt prepared for what life after college had in store for me. This was despite the fact that my
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trumpets in its headlines, above a 2013 article by Libby Sander, “Campus Counseling Centers Are as Busy as They Ever Have Been.”

I wonder what we as educators have done to contribute to or ameliorate our students’ anxieties. Have we perhaps lost our ability to nurture faith in a better tomorrow? Have we become more adept at fueling anxiety about the competitiveness of modern life than we have in cultivating confidence and competence? Has our commitment to teach critical thinking or to situate learning in real-life experiences overridden our ability to foster meaning making and hope for the future? Searching for the answers to these questions led me to a number of perspectives on anxiety, including a compelling short treatise by Daniel Smith entitled “The Idiocy of Anxiety.” Smith makes the point that anxiety is “a habit of the mind” and that, while “anxiety may come on like an affliction, … the two are not mutually exclusive.” He goes on to write, “The promising thing about a habit is that it is not the same thing as fate.”

Yet it is precisely their fate that has students of today so anxious about tomorrow.

Breaking the habit of anxious thoughts may seem easier said than done, but naming a problem is usually the first step needed to solve it.

Self-reflection also plays a critical role in problem solving, and I wonder if many of us who work in higher education have reflected on how we might also be afflicted by anxiety and a sense of dimming future prospects. Are we, perhaps, modeling the anxiousness we see in our students? In a period of declining high school graduates, we worry where our students are coming from. In an era of declining public support, we worry where our resources are coming from. And with whatever anxious energy we have left, we worry about our futile quest for the holy grail of work-life balance. Are these the concerns we are revealing to our students—and are reflected back at us?

There are few among us who would argue that today’s young adults won’t face enormous challenges in the future. Those of us who work with college students are called to ensure that they are aware of these challenges and are prepared to address them. Yet I fear that the preparation we offer is in some ways failing them. We tend to school them in strategies for life after
college—a narrow set of survival skills, if you will—rather than develop in them, or support the development of, broader capacities for coping with the vagaries of life. The strategies we convey seem to reinforce, rather than allay, our students’ fears. As Robert Nash and Jennifer Lang point out in their recent About Campus article, we may be overlooking opportunities to develop in students the capacity for meaning making. Nash and Lang wrote, “As university educators, every day we witness first hand the need for our students of all ages … to have something coherent to believe in, some centering values and goals. … (S)tudents need to make sense of the turmoil that results when they realize that they … graduate …” (pp. 2–3).

Perhaps we are not addressing our charge to assist students in developing the ability to find meaning in their lives as effectively as we could, and to flourish rather than merely survive. One of our most pressing priorities should be to model the type of meaning making we want to cultivate in our students. But modeling the habits we seek to inculcate in our students is not enough. We must also ensure that we confront, and to the best of our abilities allay, our students’ fears by striving to defuse the anxiety, habitual or otherwise, that addles them, by teaching them to balance fear with faith—faith that flows from the long-term capacity to make meaning of one’s experiences in the world beyond college. And we must train ourselves to thoughtfully examine our own anxieties and do all that we can so we do not unconsciously pass them on to our students.

I believe our students expect us and our institutions to empower them, not immobilize them. And I have faith that higher education can still achieve these aims if we are intentional about them, if we persist in our commitment to them, and if we ourselves have the faith in our students that our predecessors had in us. We owe our students an education that fosters creativity and resilience, not consternation and indecisiveness. Neither a modicum of naiveté nor an abundance of faith is incompatible with higher learning. Fear, however, indubitably is.

Notes
Nash, R., & Lang, J. (2013, September–October). The time has come to create meaning-making centers on college campuses. About Campus, 18(4), 2–9.
Sander, L. (2013, April 5). Campus counseling centers “are busy as they ever have been.” Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/article/Campus-Counseling-Centers-Arc/138545/