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Advice for new graduates: Believe. Jump. Leap. Trust.

Patrick T. Reardon | May. 17, 2014
Essay

If you're one of the millions of young people who are graduating from high school or college this season, I have one word of advice for you:

Believe.

Believe in God. Believe in other people. Believe in yourself.

I'm not sure how much your education and upbringing has prepared you for the question of faith. By its nature, faith is a squirrelly sort of concept. It doesn't lend itself to test scores.

A fact doesn't require belief. Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States -- that's a fact. Anything that can be proved doesn't require belief. If you put a cup of water in the freezer and wait a couple hours, you'll find the cup is full of ice. You can see it with your own eyes.

By contrast, faith isn't something that's forced on you by the facts. You have a choice. You can choose to believe or not to believe. You can make the leap of faith. Or stay put with your feet firmly planted in the rational world.

Here's my advice: Jump!

Since the 1940s and on up to today, more than 90 percent of Americans have told pollsters that they believe in God. Yet, many who say they believe aren't very devout.

In poll after poll, only about 40 to 45 percent of Americans claim to go to religious services weekly. And a good percentage of those may be fibbing. Sociologists who studied the question in greater depth determined that, since the 1990s, actual weekend church attendance in the U.S. has been only about 25 percent.

My advice is this: If you're going to say you believe in God, then believe in God. And live your life as if you do.

Go to religious services, be part of a faith community that ponders the meaning of life and the relationship of humanity and God. And, even more, live out your faith.

This means doing the right thing. It means taking care to help the other guy. It means having an ethical framework within which you make moral choices.

And it means believing in people.

Sure, you can choose the safe route and be distrustful. You can keep friends, family and the person you love at arm's length so they can't really hurt you. But this is a wasteful way to go through life. You're wasting the only life you have.

You can't really find out who you are and what you can do with your life if you stay hidden inside a fortress. The caterpillar will never become a butterfly if it stays inside its cocoon.

So when it comes to people: Leap!

Trust people. Be open with people. Talk about what you feel, about what you think, about what you believe. Be yourself.

Believe in yourself.

The more you are yourself, the more those around you will be open with you. And the better you'll come to understand them and enjoy being with them.

The more you are yourself, the more you come to understanding who you are and who you are becoming. This will lead you down roads and through experiences that you could never dream of.

Don't follow the advice of the bumper sticker: "He who dies with the most toys wins!" It's the person with the most friends and the most loved ones whose life is richest.

Of course, when you do this, you'll get hurt at times. A business colleague will take advantage of you. Someone you love will cheat on you. A friend will abuse your trust. Yes, bad things can and will happen.

And there will be those who tell you that's it's your fault -- for trusting others.

Yet, as Gwendolyn Brooks writes in her poem "Speech to the Young: Speech to the Progress-Toward":

Say to them,
say to the down-keepers,
the sun-slappers,
the self-soilers,
the harmony-hushers,
"Even if you are not ready for day
it cannot always be night."

That "night" is part of life. Accept it. Deal with it.

And have faith that your "day" will be brighter.

[Patrick T. Reardon, a former *Chicago Tribune* writer, is the author of the forthcoming *Catholic and Starting Out: 5 Challenges and 5 Opportunities* (ACTA), from which this essay is adapted.]

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