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Shakespeare Was Right: 'To Be Or Not To Be?'

Education defines multiple facets of learning, from professions to spirituality; how we identify with it relies on many external influences. Likewise, one's inner drive and spirit serve as a complement to self. However, an unrealized goal can further stand in the way of personal fulfillment, even in high-achieving individuals. Therefore, as one with a core identity in academics, this paper will examine the impetus behind an individual's motivations to pursue and complete higher education goals despite life's multiple personal and professional setbacks. Finally, it will prove that these factors are based on research and spirituality. As Shakespeare coined the phrase best, we will explore "to be or not to be, that is the question?" (Shakespeare 3.1.64)

Beginnings in Education

A deep dive into one's journey to achieve higher education dates back to middle school when attendance at a pilot magnet school revealed learning on a new level—the foundational connections made with an English instructor further afforded this voracious reader an outlet. Mentorship helps shape one's identity. An example of this mentorship is the instructor creating a relationship with the student by discussing books read, which the student identified as a pastime of five to six classics per week. The teacher-student bond transcended a hobby into a passion for language and writing by reinforcing the student's strengths. Wang and Holcombe of Harvard University agree that through teacher support, emotional engagement, real connectedness, and

promoting mastery goals, students can experience their "education" with fulfillment, good grades, and an eventual strong personal and school identity (652).

Influenced by the works of writers such as Hawthorne, Fitzgerald, Alcott, Salinger, Heller, Austen, Brontë, and others, one quickly finds a niche through language and literature. During this time, two novels, in particular, inspired a love for law; Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* were gripping, personally, as concepts of shame and sin intertwined with religion, from Hester Prynne's trial in *The Scarlet Letter* to the strong character of defense in Atticus Finch as a parent and lawyer in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

As the student transitioned into high school, new relationships formed with teachers and mentors to foster this new interest. For example, extracurricular activities such as the speech and debate team and leadership in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes afforded unique opportunities to identify within academics. In the student's senior year, a win over a pivotal debate competition involving law and religious freedom, based on none other than the *Declaration of Independence*, further confirmed one's passions and self-determination in humanities. Ryan's research indicates that a person's ability to self-motivate inside and outside academics comes from a "self-determination" theory (188). This theory bases itself on one's perception of how psychologically satisfying an activity or subject will be in conjunction with the instructor involved. For example, students with high competence and performance showed advanced emotional intelligence and had positive and lasting teacher-student relationships when given autonomy or included in the overall process (Deci and Ryan 189).

Pouring into advanced placement and honors courses, team sports (track, softball, and volleyball), cheerleading, and chorus were fulfilling and beneficial. At year's end, after completing the requisite work and applications, the student received scholarship offers to attend

select significant universities. However, because one's parents were opposed to the idea of their only daughter living far from the area, had expectations to help with the family architectural firm, and oddly were indifferent to the importance of education versus settling down and starting a family, there was not overwhelming support to even to commit to scholarships.

Therefore, one was encouraged to take an engagement proposal and marry at 19, a pivotal choice that influenced many identity changes within academics. Personally, parental influence in the 1980s was strong. Evidence suggests that young women in their late teens and early 20s were encouraged by "independent nuclear families" to continue to emulate the family model, theoretically relieving parents of the financial burden of "keeping adult kids on the payroll" from insurance obligations to daily expenses (Popenoe 107). As a compromise, newly married, one enrolled in the local state university and was determined to begin classes with peers and little support from her spouse and family. Further, despite a longing to attend more prominent and prestigious institutions, one continued to work full-time at the law firm.

Adulting and Education

Ironically, full-time work became necessary to make ends meet as it did not take long for one's spouse financially, emotionally, and spiritually to leave the marriage. Despite these stressors and challenges, identity in education was still at the forefront, thanks in part again to a dedicated instructor. For instance, initially attending night classes at the local university, one learned that an attorney at her firm was also her instructor, who would grow to be a valuable mentor academically and spiritually, proving an asset in one's pursuits toward undergraduate and graduate studies in literature, language, and law. One can get lost in an identity or career and stagnate if unprepared to see it to fruition. Further, a marriage, a new job, and full-time university studies in the form of a double major in English Literature and Political Science were

intensely stressful during this period. However, the instructor saw potential in her, convincing her after undergraduate studies to sit for the California bar exam despite not attending any formal years of law school.

Finally, challenging the bar exam in the early 1990s without attending law school was demanding. Still, one can achieve success with the help of mentors and colleagues; the word "PASS" indelibly etched in one's mind. However, despite the results and their immense academic fulfillment, other critical components were missing personally, i.e., an unequally yoked marriage and a feeling that one had somehow circumnavigated the system. One does not wish to carry a false identity within academics nor stay in a marriage where the spouse no longer wishes to remain due to the wife's spiritual and academic growth. Paul's letter to the Corinthian church explicitly addresses marriage: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (*The Bible*, English Standard Version, 2 Cor. 6:14).

After a season of relationship loss, one can find a loving, Godly partnership through regular attendance and involvement within a body of believers. Likewise, people's identities can improve when they are yoked equally by their life partners and personal relationships. For example, meeting one's current spouse of 25 years, one who also identifies with academics and faith can allow one to think and believe beyond what was initially possible. After establishing oneself further at the law firm with newly minted undergraduate degrees and passage of the bar exam, coupled with a new Godly marriage, one enrolls with the support and desire to complete the law school years needed now from a biblical worldview. However, as God tells us in his Word, "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (Prov. 16:9).

Grace and Family in Education

As one's spouse is an active duty Naval officer and physician, one receives orders to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Although an individual believes that no moves will occur with assurance from the military soon, there are no guarantees. For example, with the completion of law school and a legal career on hold, one may believe one's identity changed dramatically from a graduate student to a military spouse and, soon after, a mother of three. Further, by no force of intention, one's spouse's career took precedence over building and caring for a young family. Finally, one may believe that regaining that season of life cannot occur and that one must absorb one identity into the other. One must extend grace to the process and to themselves through emotional intelligence and discernment through Christ. After all, as a female, it is still considered a gender norm first to assume the role of caregiver or mother. Nonetheless, Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw and others state that we can effectively and with fulfillment identify with both nurturer and scholar—that we do not have to choose and that both identities enhance and complement one another (Rockinson-Szapkiw 68).

However, one may not have seen the forest through the trees, as living on a small, seven-square-foot island in a communist country with newborn twins, a husband deployed, and no family support proved a unique challenge. After two years of adjusting to a new identity as a wife and mother, an individual can never be quite prepared for life's most significant identity changes in the face of tragedy or health challenges.

Health and Education

After several tests and surgeries across the country and an abrupt move off the island of Guantanamo Bay, one received a terminal cancer diagnosis of Hodgkin's Lymphoma, all while pregnant with our third child. Health and fitness, of utmost importance, are critical to an individual's success and were no different during this time. There were no signs of illness other

than those masked by pregnancy, and slowly, one found the cards of identity falling. With a hospital as one's new backdrop, torn from one's temporary Caribbean home and network of friends, the military returned one to an area of family support. Despite statistics against one's survival and that of her child, one had to rely on identity within Christ and family.

Similarly, after enduring three surgeries during the pregnancy and ensuing cancer treatments, a beautiful, healthy baby girl was born. With three children under two and challenges to complete law school in which one enrolled, one can return to academics despite the battle. Andrew Martin of *AJ Martin Research* in Australia conducted global research over 30 years on the effects motivation and resilience have on education. Data revealed that resilient and consistently motivated students have higher protective factors ("boosters") against personal and school setbacks, e.g., strong self-belief, learning focus, school value, planning and study management, and spending time meditating on them for survival. (Martin 41).

After a year of remission, one underwent a stem cell transplant for relapsed Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Despite this setback, one forged on with seated studies for law school in California. As people struggle to establish a new normal within the cards they have been dealt, education can be a comfort and reliable resource. Statistically, Amanda J Rockinson-Szapkiw and others confirm that motivations for women to "sojourn upon [an] academic identity trajectory are because she is challenged to intersect this developing academic identity with her core sense of self and other identities (e.g., mother, wife, professional)" (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. 50; emphasis added). The challenge can consume as one gains strength in mind, body, and spirit, realizing that academic identity never leaves, but shifts do occur, as the Rockinson-Szapkiw research proves (51).

Several years later, one develops Melanoma and thyroid cancer, requiring major surgeries a year apart due to protracted rounds of radiation treatment. Both during the full-time care of three small children and attending law school full-time, Paul Stoltz agrees that when faced with multiple and persistent obstacles, "optimism [about improving] performance may be more effective than prevention and treatment of burnout" (Loftus 10; emphasis added). Furthermore, the theory of "cultivating joy" makes us more intelligent and satisfies cognitive obligations on a moral and professional level to nurture one's family and oneself, contributing to the researched principle of Copernicus. (Loftus 15). Nevertheless, one graduates law school despite the obstacles and stands pleased with the accomplishment, thankful for the journey. Finally, Matzka and others confirm that gratitude and maturity are factors in marked higher achievement when adjusting to traumatic life events related to returning to work or education (Matzka et al. 5).

Academic identity also culminated within the study of God's Word. Reading the Bible from cover to cover at the prompting of one's husband early during illness became an intellectual challenge and a spiritual lifeboat. None of the other aspects have depth or meaning without this piece of a person's identity. A 2009 study at Cal State University revealed that one's Bible literacy in conjunction with academics showed higher academic performance than those without such an influence, evidenced by a stronger work ethic and internal locus of control. (Jeynes 49-50).

Further, the tincture of time allows for healing, and with continued resilience and confidence in core identities, one can find stability in future challenges. In God's Word, we find evidence of His design for strength through God's nature and Christ and biblical characters. If we ponder the worldly definition of "grit," it can be defined as "perseverance with a passion for continuous long-term commitment despite setbacks and adversity," while Scripture originates

this concept in the Book of James: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Francis 52).

Francis further states in his dissertation that those incorporating biblical study offer no choice but to view God's temporary refining process positively. The convergent strand studied shows flourishing spiritual maturation and resilience characteristics (Francis 53).

To that end, due to the many rounds of radiation treatments received for the lymphoma, a person lost the use of one vocal cord, and bilateral breast cancer was an eventual diagnosis amid the COVID-19 pandemic, no less. Yet, identity in academics and law persisted as a calling. One remained positive, only this time, with a biblical worldview as an academic focus, and one prayed for a profession or field of study to combine the two. After major surgery and protracted infections, an individual can persevere, and the best may have yet to come.

The Empty Nest and Education

Fast-forward to the present, by God's grace, 21 years after an initial terminal diagnosis, one's core identity remains in education, with many lessons realized along the way. The family is whole and healthy physically and spiritually, and new opportunities continue to arise. Despite the challenges put before her, and due to one's mentorship connections and relationships early in life, an individual has the good fortune to be offered prospects simply on a relationship's longevity. A high school mentor, now a colleague, was advised of a teaching position with their current employer, which is the ultimate goal within law and academics personally. Kennedy and others confirm that the merits of one's academics with school mentors may prove pivotal later in life (21).

Further, those with an open hand of gratitude should continually strive to learn from influential instructors. (Kennedy et al. 23). research further suggests one's ability, integrity, ambition, and overall resolve are no less sharp as one ages (Matzka et al. 9). As such, a chance to teach at the collegiate level presented itself through one's middle school instructor years ago. Having never embarked on an online learning academic environment, much less teach in one, one relies on grit and resilience from within and God's wisdom in Scripture to take on the next challenge.

For context, generationally speaking, a traditional versus non-traditional student can often be a modern contradiction. With increased online learning and family housing on college campuses, an individual's status within higher education is redefined, most notably after the 2019 COVID pandemic. In addition, virtual learning has replaced many conventional classroom settings. Academic and physical learning standards have remodeled higher education and the grade school classroom. Data gathered in a 2022 study by Kulikowski and others revealed that motivation increased and remained high among university learners despite the COVID-19 setback (Kulikowski et al. 176). Additionally, many parents of college-aged children are returning to higher education to pursue initial or advanced degrees online with their children, an experience that one is currently sharing with fulfillment. With these positive predictors, along with others discussed above, we have explored that resilience and family support are part of what intrinsically motivates an individual in the face of great trial and change.

Now, in the final semesters of the program, one is grateful for the academic, physical, emotional, and spiritual journey of the past 52 years. Of course, as a student of the Bible, one would not change the days of illness for the days of spiritual gain. However, suppose another

spear of change in health or otherwise creates a setback. In that case, one can preserve education identity by keeping close to God's Word and remaining steadfast in completing the task.

Conclusion

Perhaps identity in anything or anyone other than Christ is mere pride. One can further say God's divine providence is always at play, and one can attribute the timing of differing identities in one's life to glorify Him. I imagine this to be true if we can understand His plan in our lives. An identity within education is one's goal, coupled with understanding the world within God's will; this is not easy. Further, as a Christian, it is vital to become enriched by God's wisdom rather than solely by humanity's solutions to adversity" (Francis 53). Scripture best states, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me" (John 15:5).

Thus, effectively, the paper examined one's motivations to pursue and complete higher education in the face of personal and professional setbacks. Finally, scientific and spiritual evidence proved the elements of inspiration within the drive to achieve, especially in achieving academic excellence. Again, one must say, "To be or not to be, that is the question?" (Shakespeare 3.1.64) I answer this question with a resounding "yes"; I choose to be a follower of Christ, to identify with educating myself in His Word first, then within the world, so I can better serve Him during my remaining time.

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