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## No Turning Back

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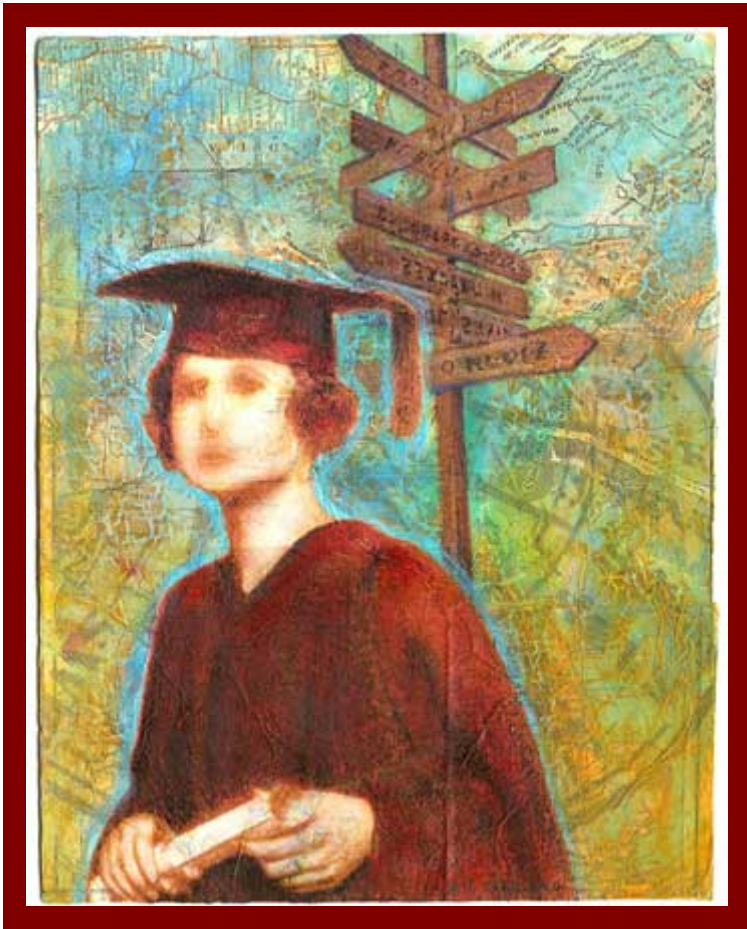
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# No Turning Back

**The first year out of college can be a confusing passage through choices and emotions — from loss to liberation.**

**Story by ANNA DETERS '05**

**Illustrations by ALESIA NORLING O'DONNELL**



Illinois Wesleyan's Class of 2005, myself included, has been out in what is called "the real world" for a year now. This inescapable fact still surprises me. I will be grocery shopping, hassling about health insurance, washing dishes, or doing some other chore that crowds my daily existence when suddenly I realize how far away my college life now seems. I have already forgotten so many of the details — what are the names of the girls who lived three rooms down the hall from me? I'm stumped. What I do recall sifts through my mind like random snapshots, while the fonder memories have already begun to turn sepia with nostalgia.

It cannot be that all those years have already come and gone — the countless clinking of cafeteria trays, wintery walks across the Quad, concerts, football games, gossip sessions in the girls' communal bathroom, Sunday afternoons at The Ames, pages turned and papers written — all distilling into one bright flash of existence. But so it goes.

And now? I look around and my friends are scattered, our paths having splintered the moment we stepped down from the commencement platform. No more jogging down the hall to a friend's room in slippers and pajamas. No more camaraderie and commiseration about this or that class. Visiting a friend has gone from walking down the hall or across campus to a cross-country flight, a four-hour drive, or, at minimum, a substantial urban transit. As one of my former floormates who now lives in downtown Chicago poignantly laments, "It's lonely living somewhere where you can count your friends on one hand."

But it's not only that the close friends aren't so proximally close anymore — it's that making new friends will never again be so easy. As undergraduates, we lived in a social beehive. Everyone in sight was a friend just waiting to happen. Now, well, how do real adults meet potential friends, anyway? We really have yet to figure this one out, and many of my peers from the Class of '05 are expressing a regret that as full-fledged adults, there are few places to comfortably meet new people, except for at work, which is yet another challenge in adaptation.

Although most of us, I believe, had some sort of job during our high school or college years, the intensified routine of a full-time, full-year employment is something new. "I do the same exact thing every day," grumbles a friend who also graduated last year. "Setting the alarm for 5:30 a.m. and going to work five days a week is a different game from getting up at 8:30 or 9:00 and following a schedule that changes day to day, semester by semester." But work is a semester that's not going to be over anytime soon — indeed, graduation does not just mark the end of four years of college; it issues in a whole new way of life, for who can really recall a time when he or she wasn't a student? We may not even realize it at the time, but upon graduation most of us say goodbye to the security of the cyclical year paced by midterms, final exams, and long summers. Oh, those long summers.

In addition to the regimentation of regular employment is the very lack of those amenities which helped streamline our days to maximum flexibility and efficiency. No matter how diverse our undergraduate experiences at Illinois Wesleyan were, I think we can all agree that life on campus was blissfully convenient. Between the dining hall that fed us and the Shirk Center where we worked it off, the classrooms where we spent our days and the library where we spent our nights, an abundance of resources were undeniably at our fingertips.

And now? Well, as another '05 grad notes, "Everything takes so long!" Not only must we go grocery shopping, but we also have to prepare our own food and wash the dishes (all of this more time-consuming than I, at least, ever suspected). In school everything was so fast and convenient, and many of us first-year alumni find that we don't have the patience we should for doing things in daily life because we never had to do them in college.



We quickly notice that getting to the gym requires better planning and an automobile and that the local public library is hardly impressive after one has wallowed for so long in the luxuries of The Ames. But something more significant, although realized less immediately, is our removal from the “enlightened academic community.” Except for those who enter the teaching profession or go on to graduate school, leaving college is a trade of the gown for the town. Suddenly the intellectual mission is compromised — without pressure, encouragement, and stimulation from the academy, we may find it easy to neglect the life of the mind. “I miss being introduced to books and ideas I would not venture into on my own,” remarks a former student. Not to mention all the events, speakers, and entertainers arranged to amuse or enlighten us on nearly a daily basis, which now in civic life we have to seek out on our own.

It would seem that at the end of formal schooling there is a rather bleak initiation into the daily grind of full adulthood, which, paradoxically, is mysterious even in its routine predictability. In school, “next year” was always predetermined; after second grade came third, after sophomore year came junior. We always knew what to expect. Beyond the campus gates we face a long expanse of life — totally uncharted and shaped only by societal pressures telling us by what age to get married, stop wearing short-shorts, have kids, and retire. Like being projected into space, we are greeted by a vast unknown with no safety rope, no teacher or institution whose job it is to light our way.

But this image is misleading. We are not suspended in a dark expanse; we are progressing through it, into it, generating our own glow. If not, why did we go to school in the first place? One former student, while admitting he misses many aspects of being a college student, is confident in his ability to carry on and, in fact, promote what he liked best about the University. “Everything I have lost is something I hope to restore where I now reside.” Currently working to develop a drama program at an inner-city high school, he goes on to add, “What I gained at IWU was a thorough appreciation of a variety of arts and activities, and now I strive to recreate those opportunities in new places.”

Certainly, joining the workforce has its constructive challenges. A friend of mine, also a ’05 grad, revels in her professional life. “I feel that I learned about 20 percent of what I needed for my job at college and 80 percent in the workplace,” she says. “It’s amazing what you learn every day.” Other perks include more time to spend with family and more opportunities to pursue hobbies and other interests. “When I leave work for the day, I’m done working for the day,” says another ’05 grad. “Since I don’t have any homework, I’m able to get back to my interests — cooking, reading for pleasure, and spending my weekends however I like.” And let us not forget that a regular job has the merit of a regular income and, with it, a certain relaxation of the proverbial “starving student” lifestyle.

But by no means are all recent graduates immersed in the workforce. There are those who continue on with medical, law, or graduate school; those who join the Peace Corps; those, like me, who travel or live abroad; those in the military, and so on. Indeed, everyone with whom I spoke emphasized the uniqueness of his or her experiences and circumstances. There is a joy and vigor in our splintered paths. As self-dependent adults we have the responsibility, the skills, and the maturity to fully embrace our individuality and put it to good use.

Many of us recognized this completion of a certain growth during our last year at Illinois Wesleyan. When asked if they miss college, many reply, “I don’t miss it because I was ready to leave,” or “I was ready to move on to the next stage of life.” Yes, the next stage of life. As friend of mine recently succinctly put it, “There’s no turning back.” No turning back?

As I watch my younger brother navigate through his first year of college, I feel various shades of envy, sometimes wishing that I could turn back and start all over. But then, right on the tail of this thought comes a wave of relief that this is impossible. No one can take those years away from me. I’ve finished them with success and without regret, and if I could go back, I wouldn’t want to. The next stage of life is calling.



**The author, Anna Deters, spent the past year and a half in Turin, Italy, where she completed an M.A. in American studies at the University of Turin. Various travels took her, among other places, to Scotland and Israel, Paris and Rome, the Black Forest, and the top of Mount Etna. She recently returned to the United States and begins her Ph.D. studies in English and American literature at Washington University in St. Louis this fall.**