

What Do You Say on Their First Day?: How to Help New Students Have a Much Better University Experience

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What do you say to students on their first day(s) of university? In what seems like a lifetime ago, I stumbled upon a fascinating, jarring answer to this question, and I was never the same again. Over the years, I have presented it to thousands of new university students, and I have watched it have the same sorts of effects on them that it had on me. My aim now is to share with you what I have been sharing with them, with the hope of letting it have an even wider impact.

The best way for me to share what I have been telling new university students is to just tell you. To help me do that, I am going to imagine that you are a brand new university student, right now. To help this go well, I have one request: I would like you to imagine this with me. I would like you to imagine this with so much enthusiasm that you almost forget that you are only imagining.

Why imagine this? First, because it might help you more accurately assess the possible benefits of the things I am about to say. Second, because your experience of doing this might help improve your relationships with the people in your life who actually are, or were, or will be new university students. Third, because it may help increase your sympathy for new university students, and this in turn may help you be more mindful of and more proactive in safeguarding their well-being. Last, and most importantly, because there are things that can only be communicated under imagined circumstances. Sometimes, in order to smuggle a message past a person's psychological safeguards, it is necessary for this person to believe that you are obviously talking *to* someone else, and *about* someone else. Once this person lowers their guard and begins to see themselves as nothing more than a bystander, listening partly out of playful curiosity, and mostly out of politeness, it then becomes possible for this bystander to begin to realize that this message was not actually created for someone else. It was created for *them*.

For all of these reasons, starting at the end of this paragraph, I am asking you to be as polite and playful as you can be by imagining that this article is actually *about* you and *for* you. I want you to imagine that you are a brand-new university student, reading this because it was written specifically for you, and because its topic is so incredibly pertinent right now. If you are thinking, "Well, this is going to be easy, because I actually *am* a new university student," that is wonderful. You are imagining beautifully! If you are thinking, "uhhh, wait. I actually don't *need* to imagine, because I actually *am* a new university student," that is just perfect. Now that

the last few paragraphs were for nothing, let's just forget about them, and move on.

(In a [companion article](#) to this article, I provide important information about the contents of the rest of this article. You may want to stop and read at least some of that other article now. For more information, consult the following footnote.¹)

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Welcome to university! I am so glad that you have started on this amazing adventure, and I am so excited for you. I hope you have the best time of your life as a university student, and I hope you leave university with treasured memories and no regrets.

I am here to do two things. First, I am going to tell you a story about me, and then I am going to tell you a story about you.

But before I do anything, let me just say: This is *such* a perfect moment! As I stand here, soaking it in with you, I cannot help but want to think back on my own experiences as a brand-new university student. Was I scared? Was I excited? Was I hopeful?

I want to remember, but I can't. In fact, I can't remember anything about my first days of university. I can't remember because those days mark the beginning of the two worst years of my entire life. My experience as a new university student was truly miserable, and it ended with me being expelled from my university, with almost no hope of ever being allowed back in. I regret so many things about those first two years of university. Today, I am going to share my three biggest regrets about those two years.

But before I do, I want you to know why I am sharing them. It is not because I want to. In fact, there is nothing I want less than to share this information. My father died knowing absolutely none of it (I lied to him about everything), and even today my mother thinks she knows all of it,

¹ In a companion article, titled "[The Story behind the Deathbed Story](#)," I answer a series of questions about the material that appears in this article after this footnote. Where did this material originally come from? What was that like? What caused me to begin sharing it with others? What convinced me that I absolutely must begin sharing it with all my students? What effects did that have? What was it like to share it with my young children (in the form of a bedtime story), and what effects did it have on them? Once I began presenting it to all our new university students at our New Student Conferences, how did it change, and why? Why publish this article in exactly this way? What is my exact hope for this article, and what is my most urgent message? In that companion article, I answer these questions (plus two that I cannot list here).

If you hate seeing the trailer before the movie, then read the rest of this article first and save the Q&A article for last. If you love seeing the trailer before the movie, then I recommend that you read at least some of the Q&A article now, before you read the rest of this article, because it will certainly pique your curiosity, and because this will probably give you an even better experience. (The answers progress from least spoiling to most spoiling. If you reach a point where the answers have begun to seem too spoiling, stop, read the rest of this article, and finish that Q&A article later.) If your favorite way to watch a movie is to first watch "The Making Of" that movie, then feel free to read that entire Q&A article before resuming this article, because that is exactly what it is.

but she only knows some. In fact, before I began sharing these regrets with new university students, I never shared them with anyone.

So why share them with you now? Because I made a promise. At the end of my first two years, when I was at my lowest low, with zero hope of lifting my head, let alone my prospects, I promised the universe that if I could find a way to somehow climb out of this hole, I would spend the rest of my life doing my best to help others avoid falling into it in the first place. To my utter astonishment, here I am now, still keeping that promise.

So, what were my three biggest regrets about my experience as a new university student? Let me list them in the order that they always occur to me.

Regret #1: I made absolutely zero new friends. In fact, in two years I barely even made a new acquaintance. I did make one, but I can no longer remember that student's first or last name, and I promise you that that student does not remember me at all. All around me, friendships were forming and strengthening, and there I was, avoiding everyone and hiding from them. The worst thing was that I really wanted to make new friends. I wanted this as much as anybody, and probably even more. Sadly, I was simply too scared and too ashamed to admit it. And so I hid. In crowds of people, and across countless opportunities, I hid. For two years, at least as far as everyone else was concerned, it was as though I wasn't even there.

Regret #2: I joined absolutely nothing. I didn't join any club. I didn't join any organization. I didn't join any team. Believe it or not, I didn't even join a single conversation, even in situations where I was openly welcomed to do so. I'd be sitting and eating something at a table of one, and students next to me would sometimes try to bring me into their conversation. They'd say things like "don't you think?" And, believe it or not, I would reply by quietly picking up my things and leaving without saying a word. I wanted so badly to be included, but every time I was given the opportunity, I chickened out.

It amazes me how good some of those opportunities were. For example, one day during my first semester, a random stranger in a hallway suddenly stopped right in front of me. He looked into my eyes, as if he could actually see me. Then he smiled a great big smile and said, "You look like you like Star Trek!" My first thought was that he was making fun of me. Was it too on the nose to just call me a nerd? Before I knew it, though, his arm was on my shoulder, and he was walking me, as his new guest, to the soon-to-start next meeting of the Star Trek Club. And what a club! I sat on a couch surrounded by two dozen students that I did not know, but who wanted to know me. I sat there for the entire hour-long meeting, growing happier and happier by the minute. This was everything that I had ever wanted. Star Trek did not come up even once, and no one cared. This wasn't about their official excuse to be there. This was about having fun, making friends, and feeling like part of something. Soon, I resolved that when this meeting ended, by gosh I was going to join this wonderful club. I was going to ask how to do that, and then I was going to do it. But I never

did. When the meeting ended, I panicked and fled. I wanted to join. I wanted this so much. But I was too afraid and too ashamed.

Regret #3: I misunderstood what university is even for. I believed that you go to university for one simple, obvious reason: to see how smart you are. Because I believed this, I could not help but see other students as my competitors, all competing to seem the smartest. I saw friendships with these other students as difficult or even impossible, because how does one make friends with one's competitors? No wonder I kept to myself, and no wonder I had so much difficulty getting involved with anything. For me, university was a land filled with enemies, and university life was unavoidably lonely, petty, begrudging, and depressing.

If only I had known what university is *actually* for. You don't go to university to see how smart you are. You go to university to get smarter. University is the weight room for the brain. You lift weights to get stronger, and you go to university to get smarter. Oh, if only I had realized this! In the weight room, everyone is a friend, and everyone is happy, because everyone can get stronger together. It is the same with university. We can all get smarter together. The more effectively we work together, and cheer for each other, the smarter we will all get. Those aren't competitors. They are allies.

I did not realize this, and I experienced every symptom of the poisonous mindset that I had. I was terrified of challenges; I saw learning as pointless; I felt humiliated when needing to try hard (because I believed that the less I tried, the smarter I must be); and I was incapable of recovering from failures and setbacks. Needless to say, things went very badly. After my first year of university, I was put on academic probation. At the end of two years, I was expelled almost permanently. In order to ever again be considered for readmission to that university, I needed to somehow make the Dean's List at another university that the first university respected. This was the bleakest point of my entire life. I felt so low and full of despair. I could not imagine things ever getting better, ever again.

To my amazement, though, things did get better. I had an experience that changed everything, and nothing was ever the same again.

Thus ends the story about me. Now I am going to tell you a story about you.

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This story is a story about you, the individual person that I am telling it to, right now. You may find this difficult to understand, but please do your best to understand me literally, because I mean it literally. This story is about *you*.

This story is about you, but the you of many, many years from now. You are very old and finally nearing your end. You are laying on a hospital bed, with a respirator over your mouth and nose and with various tubes and monitors attached to you, and you are in the latter throes of whatever it is that is finally going to kill you. If you try to leave the hospital, you

know that you will die somewhere in the hallway. You are laying on your deathbed, and you know it. With your room all to yourself, you lay and reflect.

A man comes in, and you can tell he must be one of the hospital do-gooders. A social worker? A chaplain? A volunteer visitor? You aren't sure. He matches the name on your chart to the name on his clipboard, and he smiles as he sees that he's found the right room. As he pulls up a chair, you wonder why the do-gooders never wonder if they are welcome to pull up a chair. You would ask him this, but your respirator makes talking impossible.

When he starts talking, he takes you completely off guard. You expected something cheery and canned, but you get this:

"Before you could see me, I stood there, out there in the hallway, watching you, and I couldn't help but wonder: What were you thinking about? You were *regretting* something, weren't you. Wow, what a captivating face you had. Deathbed regrets, eh? Aren't they nasty?"

Then he gets more serious and curious.

"I wonder what it was you were regretting. I wonder if I can guess."

He stares into your eyes, searching for clues.

"Was it about that special someone, from way back when? What was it, I wonder. Did you never ask them on a date? Did you never even talk to them? Did you keep trying and trying to take that big, brave step, but never succeed? Did you even sometimes have that perfect excuse to go for it? Did you bump into them somewhere? Did you get partnered together for something? Did you spend an entire semester sitting right beside them in school? And you *still* didn't ask them out? Did you even ask them *anything*?"

"Or was it about the next stage? Did you never pop the question? Or did they keep popping it, but you kept saying no? Either way, did you let that special someone slip away, because they wanted to get more serious, and you thought you didn't? What an awful thing that would be to think back on. Did they eventually go and marry someone else instead? Do you still know them? Do you still bump into them, and make excuses to run away again? Do you follow them online, so that you can constantly contemplate what might have been? The worst thing is, you saw all of this coming, didn't you. You *knew* you should marry them. You *knew* you shouldn't let them get away. Goodness. Did you spend the rest of your life living a mistake?"

"Maybe it was kids. Did you never have children? Did you keep putting it off until it was too late? Or did you keep telling yourself that you didn't really want any and that you'd be happier without them? Wow, I bet that could really start to haunt a person. Do you keep wondering what they would look like now? Do you wonder what it would be like having them visit you here in the hospital? Would they be bickering in the waiting room right now, fighting about some same old thing, or maybe bickering just for the sake of bickering? Would you be smiling, wondering if they would ever

give you a moment's peace? Wow...what a terrible silence to have to listen to instead.

"Or, did you *not* want kids, but you had them anyway? Did you have too many? What were you thinking? Who did you do that for? Did you waste away all your best years, begging for babysitters and putting off diaper changes? Would you tell people, 'I would never wish away my kids...' but then let your heartbreak cut off the rest of that sentence? Did anyone ever really know? I wonder. When I walked in, did I catch you thinking back on all the things you gave up your chance to do?"

He pauses to think.

"You didn't have a big falling out with them, did you? A big fight? A rift that wouldn't end? Did you never call and say you were sorry? Did *years* go by, and all you ever had to do was make one lousy phone call and spit out one lousy apology? How long ago *was* that? And now, is it too late? Do you not even know their current number? Do you not even know the area code? 'I'm sorry. It was my fault. Let's not fight anymore. I miss you, kid.' Did you never say it, and now there are no more chances to?"

He is struck by the next thought, and looks to the doorway as he soaks it in.

"Goodness. Are they not here to visit because they don't even know you're *here*?"

He searches your eyes again.

"Oh no. It wasn't *your* parents, was it? Was that the big falling out? Was that the phone call you kept not making, and the sorry you kept withholding? Did you let that curtain of silence fall? Did you let yourself pretend that it matters so much who was right?"

"Isn't it awful how parents sometimes up and die without warning? You assume you still have lots of time. You assume you have forever. And then, in the blink of an eye, they're gone. They're gone, and now you have forever to think about what you never told them. Was that what you were thinking about, when I first walked in?"

"Maybe it wasn't about apologies. Maybe it wasn't even about family. Tell me: Did you never express your gratitude? All of those people who helped you along your way, with guidance, love, and encouragement—did you never tell them how deeply you appreciated them? Did you never tell your mentors how glad you were to have them? Did you never let your role models know what wonderful role models they were? Did you have friends that mattered to you more than *air*, but that you expressed just as little appreciation for? No phone call, even? No letter? Did you even bother to decide what you would have said, if ever you had gotten up the nerve? 'Hey. You inspired me. You opened my eyes. You were there for me. You made me want to become a better person. You made me want to become more like *you*. I am so, so glad to have had you in my life. I should have told you so. I should have told you to death. But now, here I am: too old and too late.'

"Did you never travel? Did you never go and see the world, like you always said you would? Did you even buy the backpack, but never use it?"

Did you even buy the motor home, but mostly leave it parked? Were your travel dreams so big that you could barely keep from smiling during your passport photo? Did you even *get* your passport photo? It's awful, isn't it? You spend your whole life looking forward to all the traveling you are going to do, and at the end of it all you realize that now you can't even leave your hospital room.

"Did you never go to college? Did you go, but drop out? Did you tell yourself things about wasted time and money, but only half believe them? Did you go to the *wrong* college? Did you get the wrong degree? Did you never go to grad school? Did you go to the wrong kind? Whose life were you living, anyway? Did you trade in your dreams for boredom and financial security and Mom or Dad's selectively approving smile? Did you live your parents' dream? Your spouse's? Some random one that you somehow just got stuck with? And now and then, would you bump into a reminder of your true passion, but pretend not to notice? Did you avoid watching certain movies without ever fully admitting to yourself why? Did you put telltale pictures up on your wall on condition that you never think too much about what they implied? Did you even start to tell yourself the big lie: that now it's too late? Did you even keep changing it? 'Ok, maybe it wasn't *always* too late, but now it really is.'

"Did you never really go for it? Did you never write your novel? Did you never write even one song? Did you chicken out of the big audition, or the big try-outs? Did you never apply for that dream school or that dream job, or lick the stamp on that terrifying letter of inquiry? Did you stand and stare at that mountain of hats, and never throw yours in too? Did you tell yourself that you'd obviously never make it anyway, so why bother? Oh, those wretched might-have-beens. You think that the might-have-beens will be ok. You think you might even enjoy them, as things to pleasantly ponder. But all you actually do is grow more and more sick to your stomach. Why didn't I *go*? Why didn't I *try*? Why didn't I *see*?

"Did you always aim low? Did you tell yourself that aiming low was better, because aiming high and missing would only make you miserable? Did you staple 'good enough' to your scab dreams and try to forget the ones you'd covered up? Is that why you never went after that big award or that big promotion? Is that why you avoided that ambitious new project or that amazing new idea? Is that why you never started your own business or gave up too easily on the one you did? Is that why you stopped loving your work? Is that why you started pretending that you liked the idea of early retirement, even though you never did? And, all the while, did you even keep tabs on those *other* people—the ones who had the gall to chase after *your dreams*? Did you spend your whole life like a cat at a window, staring at *your birds*, and *other cats*?"

The man stops talking and visibly changes gears. He suddenly seems reluctant to talk.

"I'm very sorry. I've been acting as though I work here at this hospital, but I don't even know what hospital this is. I'm here to tell you that in two minutes, we're putting you back. We're going to rewind reality and

take you back to a time when you were much, much younger. We can't take you back to diapers, because that doesn't work. Instead, we're taking you back to that perfect moment of your life, when you were old enough to already know what unbearable regret tastes like, but young enough to have most of your big regrets still ahead of you. We're taking you back to give you a second chance, a chance to do things right this time—the way that you always knew you should have done them in the first place. Everything, and every memory, will be exactly as it was on that day, and from that day forward you will live the rest of your life all over again, making all fresh choices.”

He looks deep into your eyes, as if to memorize them.

“I said everything will be the same as it was on that day, but that isn't quite true. This time, one thing is going to be a little bit different than it was the first time. Right after you arrive back as your younger self, we have arranged for you to have a carefully planned, carefully orchestrated experience. Either in person, or in a way that works even better than in person, I am going to show up—me, the same person talking to you right now—and I am going to tell you the story of what *just* happened to you.”²

² This article was presented at two conferences: CogTeacho: A Special Two-Day Cogtweeto Event, in August 2023; and the American Association for Philosophy Teachers International Workshop-Conference on Teaching Philosophy in July 2024. I would like to thank all the attendees of those presentations for their extremely helpful reactions and feedback. I would also like to thank the editor and two anonymous referees for this journal for their remarkable, provocative, and priceless feedback. Most of all, I would like to thank each and every one of my students. Without you, none of this article, or its companion article, would ever have existed. Please never forget what I told you, because it is still true, and will never stop being true. You are my student; you will always be my student; and I care what happens to you. I care a *lot*!