



Karin Kasdin - The Faster Times

WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU ARE NOT GOING TO COLLEGE?

My father was very proud of his mug collection. Each mug on his bedroom bureau was embossed with the name of a college or university. Each member of our family had graduated from one of those institutions. Dad had the option of sipping his morning coffee from a Princeton mug or one from Stanford, Harvard, The Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern, Ithaca College, or The University of Rochester. Our family, spouses included, has amassed two PhDs, two MBAs, two master's degrees and a CPA. School was what we did and we did it well. I don't write about this to boast. I write about this as I ask you to imagine how my husband, Harold, and I felt when one of our three sons decided that college was not for him. I ask you to imagine how my son must have felt when he said to us, "It's not that I *won't* go to college, it's that I *can't*."

As is the case with most families today, college was a mandate in our household...like brushing your teeth or taking out the trash. Our sons were free to ask us why we expected compliance, but their approval of our answers was irrelevant. They were expected to perform these tasks regardless of their feelings about them. Harold and I made ourselves available for help whenever help was needed. When it came to school, help was needed for Andrew in a big way. Diagnosed with severe ADHD in middle school, formal education was torture for him, except for the socialization part at which he excelled. My son suffered no end of criticism and ridicule from teachers throughout his secondary school years. One even called him stupid in front of the class. He was later fired, but that gave us small comfort.

As concerned parents we put ourselves on overdrive to try to turn our son into the student we "knew" he could be. We enrolled him in private school where we thought he would receive more individualized attention. We spent a fortune on God knows how many tutors and psychologists. We medicated him so he could focus at school, but he was a zombie with no appetite the rest of the time. It took a village to get him through high school. It may actually have taken a whole city.

We hired a college counselor to help us with the excruciating process of applying to colleges that accept kids with his unimpressive GPA. We pleaded, bribed, cajoled, and lectured. In short, we did everything but let Andrew be Andrew.

Approximately six weeks before he was to report to college, Andrew asked Harold and me to drop what we were doing and take him to lunch. Over burgers and fries and in public (my kid is far from stupid), he dropped the bomb. Harold and I had a decision to make and we had a split second in which to make it. We could register devastation and disappointment and push him one more time, as we had pushed him all of his life, to at least give college a try, or we could accept his decision with full hearts, and by accepting that, we could finally accept him for the smart, funny, loving young man he is. We chose the latter.

Andrew didn't become the belly-scratching, gum-chewing, penniless lout that well-meaning parents hold up to their children as the end result of not obtaining a college degree. Quite the opposite is true. He obtained a license to sell commercial real estate, (which, by the way, required reading and math skills), found a job in a reputable firm, and rented a house. He grills hamburgers in his backyard and plays basketball at the gym and has no problem finding dates. By the time he was twenty-three he had developed quite a reputation in our area, and he receives job offers on a regular basis. He recently became an entrepreneur by starting an internet company. Did I mention that EVERYONE likes him?

Blessedly, Andrew doesn't hold his childhood against us. In between all those tutoring and therapy sessions there were family vacations and a whole lot of soccer and basketball, and I suppose that counted for something.

Linda Lee, in her book, ***Success Without College***, writes, "Here is who belongs in college: *the high-achieving student who is interested in learning for learning's sake, those who intend to become schoolteachers, and those young people who seem certain to go on to advanced degrees in law, medicine, architecture, engineering, and the like. Here is who actually goes to college: everyone.*"

But college is *not* for everyone and not everyone should be pushed to matriculate. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, **25% of college graduates are currently in jobs that don't require a college degree**. Years ago, immigrant families and other laborers saw higher education as the only way out of poverty. A diploma signified to employers that the person who earned it was special. But as the number of kids attending college skyrockets (the number is currently 70 percent), the employment playing field becomes more and more level. Richard K. Vedder, director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity and professor of economics at Ohio University claims that "the number of jobs requiring a college degree is now less than the number of young adults graduating from universities, so more and more graduates are filling jobs

for which they are overqualified.” In other words, a college degree no longer sets you apart from the pack.

Charles Murray, political scientist and scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, writes in the Chronicle of Higher Education that “it has been empirically demonstrated that doing well (B average or better) in a traditional college major in the arts and sciences requires levels of linguistic and logical/mathematical ability that only 10-15 percent of the nation’s youth possess. That doesn’t mean that only 10-15 percent should get more than a high school education. It does mean that the four-year residential program leading to a BA is the wrong model for a large majority of young people.”

Dropout rates today are ridiculously high, particularly for public universities. Only 33 percent of freshmen entering the University of Massachusetts in Boston graduate within six years. The rate is 41 percent for the University of Montana and 44 percent for the University of New Mexico. The economist, Mark Schneider refers to colleges with these dropout rates as “**failure factories**” and they are the norm. While American high schools graduate about three quarters of their students in four years, American colleges only graduate **50 percent of their students in six years.**

Clearly, a vast number of our young people are wasting valuable time and money in college when they could be learning a trade, working as apprentices, becoming entrepreneurs, immersing themselves in the arts, or working in community service. Most large companies today offer training programs through which employees learn the skills they will need to perform well in the jobs for which they were hired.

College has become both an entitlement and a prerequisite to a happy life, so much so, that adults even feel free to push *other people’s children*. Andrew and I still flinch when we recall a trip to the ER three years ago. Andrew was doubled over in pain from a kidney stone. As the ER doctor, who we happened to know socially, administered a morphine drip, he took the liberty, (with good intentions and Andrew’s best interest at heart) of informing my son that he would not amount to very much if he didn’t go to college and that he would most certainly come to regret his decision later in life. Now that’s what you want to hear when your urinary tract is about to explode.

The single statistic that pops up over and over again in the research is that college graduates earn more money than those without a college degree. Well yes, they do. This statistic compels us to push our high school kids onward toward a degree. For some, this is the right thing to do. But our materialistic culture has also led us to push some of our youth into what can be an agonizing four year ordeal that will in the long run, lead to failure. For those who don’t enjoy learning, going to college is only about earning potential. We, as a nation, are all about money.

The alternative to college is not Skid Row. Believe it or not, there are plumbers who can afford to take their families on vacation. Computer technologists own their own cars and even support mortgages. Mammogram technicians feel good about helping women detect breast cancer. **Some hairdressers who have opened their own shops earn more than some lawyers who work for other people.** And some young men with high IQs, winning personalities, and learning disabilities can sell office buildings. I wish my two degrees could have taught me that before my son did.

This post ends here. What follows, for your enjoyment, is a partial list of people who managed to succeed in life without college degrees:

Edward Albee, Woody Allen, Maya Angelou, Wally Amos (the cookie guy), Jane Austen, Dan Akyroyd, **Bill Gates**, Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, Joan Baez, Warren Beatty, David Ben-Gurion, Sonny Bono, **Rick Bragg (Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist)**, Richard Branson, Albert Brooks, David Byrne, James Cameron (anyone heard of *Titanic* or *Avatar*?), Raymond Chandler, Coco Chanel, John Cheever, Sean Connery, **Walter Cronkite**, Peter Jennings, Daniel Day-Lewis, Michael Dell, Princess Diana, Leonardo DiCaprio, Bob Dylan, Clint Eastwood, **Thomas Edison**, Harvey Weinstein, **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, Jane Fonda, **Benjamin Franklin**, David Geffen, **John Glenn**, Richard Grasso (headed the New York Stock Exchange), Ernest Hemingway, Dustin Hoffman, L. Ron Hubbard, Ralph Lauren, **Alex Haley**, Doris Lessing, **Rush Limbaugh**, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Lindbergh, Madonna, Malcolm X, Steve Martin (how many times have I read his articles in *The New Yorker*?), H.L. Mencken, S.I. Newhouse, Jack Nicholson, Neil Simon, Gwyneth Paltrow, Bob Pittman (founder of MTV) Edgar Allan Poe, Wolfgang Puck, Robert Redford, **John D. Rockefeller**, J.D. Salinger, Margaret Sanger (birth control education), Dawn Steel, Barbra Streisand, William Howard Taft, Nina Totenberg, **Ted Turner**, Mark Twain, Governor Jesse Ventura, **Thomas J. Watson (founder of IBM)**, Walt Whitman, August Wilson, Anna Wintour, **Frank Lloyd Wright**, Wilbur and Orville Wright, and Harry S. Truman...that's PRESIDENT HARRY S. TRUMAN!