

A.P.O.V.*

*Alumni Point of View

A Fork in the Road

One graduate grapples with the “quarter-life crisis.”

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AFTER RECEIVING my diploma on a sweltering morning in May 2004, I found myself filled not with a sense of hope but with trepidation. I had been having nightmares in which I had forgotten I was signed up for a required class—and the final was about to start. This dream, however, was not the cause of my unease. With a bit of shock, I realized that neither was it due to the fact that I had yet to pack my dorm room, despite knowing I had less than 24 hours to move out. Not only did I have no idea how I was going to pack in time, but I also had no idea where to go from there.

In many ways my college experience was a prolonged adolescence; Vanderbilt was a safety net between me and the real world. Thanks to dorm living, I didn't have to face the realities of rent or utility payments; my life was highly structured, with well-defined parameters of what was expected of me; my social network was essentially provided; and I had ample opportunities to expand my circle of friends and explore my interests.

It is no real surprise, then, that I found myself completely unprepared for life after college. The few bills I had to pay filled my stomach with a cold knot of dread. Most of my friends from high school no longer lived in my hometown, and I had absolutely no

idea how to make more. Perhaps most important, I had no job prospects—and no clue how to get any.

My parents were nice enough to let me move back in with them, rent free, and drive their car to the job I had yet to get. I was grateful but also a bit downhearted: This wasn't how it was supposed to be. I was supposed to graduate with a plan for life in hand along with my diploma. I was supposed to be living my dream in some bright, shiny city of the future, not sleeping in the same twin bed in the same room in which I had slept for more than 20 years.



Although I found a job within a few months, I became depressed. I ached with homesickness for Vanderbilt. I missed conversations about politics, philosophy, theology—often with people I'd only just met. I missed (and still miss) my college friends dearly, for they watched me grow and know the hows and whys of

who I am today. I definitely miss being able to put my work-study paycheck towards whatever I want, rather than student-loan payments. I felt more financial freedom working 20 hours a week than I do now, working full time.

I was struggling to find where I should be, struggling in this vast world beyond the Vanderbilt bubble, where I was basically alone and everyone was looking out for his own best

interest. I was suddenly outside a support system, and it was hard. It was easy to fall into ennui. It was easy to sit at home after work, apathetically glancing through the want ads without intending to follow through on anything. It was easy to waste spare hours watching *South Park* rather than trying to get a grip on my life.

I was afraid. I was afraid to stay in this circumstance that made me so unquestioning and full of self-doubt. I was afraid, too, to take that chance—the giant leap of faith—and step out naked into the real world, trying to find my bliss. Disoriented in this new world, and fervently hoping to break through ennui and into the life I was meant for, I did nothing. Add to that the insult that Comedy Central's “Adult Swim” kept changing its lineup every time I got used to it, and I knew this was not the way it was supposed to be.

I had no idea where I was going. What happened to my life plan? I was supposed to graduate, then set forth on a great adventure—the career of my choosing, sunny apartment in a fabulous city, lots of friends and lots of wealth. But here I sat, lacking even a basic knowledge of where the road to the future lay. I was working in a job I wasn't particularly fond of—OK, a job I hated with the fire of a thousand suns—back in my hometown, living with my parents, with no idea what I wanted to do or where I wanted to go. (I did, however, buy my very first car two weeks before my 24th birthday. So, theoretically, I could go anywhere as soon as I found the road.)

I wanted to go to graduate school, was accepted into several, but did not receive financial aid. There was simply no way I would be able to absorb the additional debt burden, especially considering that nagging sensation I had in the pit of my stomach that maybe—just maybe—graduate school was just a way for me to put off the real world for a while and regress into the little cocoon of security I always felt at Vanderbilt.

As I look around at my friends, I find that almost the only ones living successfully are those who got degrees in engineering or science. The great glittering liberal arts degrees are wonderful, and I don't regret mine, but it's simply not as easy to find decent work with a degree in medieval philosophy, for example. Even those who have the jobs they had planned for are barely making enough to get by. They are working two jobs, living at home, or fitting four people into a one-bedroom house to pay the bills. Many of them went to law school just to have something to do, some pretense at moving forward. And most of the ones who didn't are planning to go in the future. Our lives are filled with apprehension and self-doubt—

the world will reach its limit on lawyers eventually, after all, and I think critical mass is scheduled for two weeks from now. What will we do then?

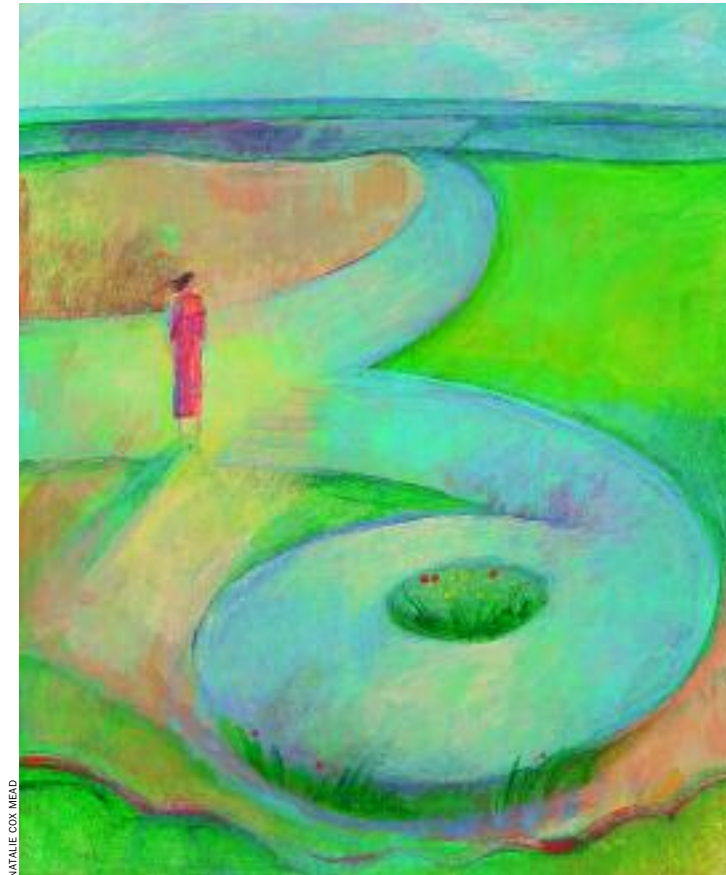
Call it the quarter-life crisis.

In his book *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland describes this occurrence as “a period of mental collapse occurring in one's twenties, often caused by an inability to function outside of school or structured environments, coupled with a realization of one's essential aloneness in the world.”

Yes. Yes. A resounding yes. We live in a complex and multiple-choice society, which can make choosing from our options a daunting task. (If we can't pick between five entrees at Ruby Tuesday, how are we supposed to choose a career?) So daunting is this task, in fact, that many recent graduates (like myself)

fail to choose at all, allowing our lives just to happen to us.

More-established adults say to imagine what you would do if you had unlimited resources and didn't have to work, and that's what you should pursue as a career. For me, however, and I imagine for many others like



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me, the answer to that question is simple: nothing. I would do nothing. I would lie around on a beach somewhere writing poetry or travel the world.

It's not that I'm lazy. No one with a degree from Vanderbilt is lazy. It's more that I have been trained to think critically about the world, how and why it functions, and I don't really know how to do anything else. I can't build a carburetor, but I can write a 30-page paper on the Kabbalistic influences on Dante's *Paradiso*. How can I transfer that into a career? And how, especially, can I transfer that into a career that wouldn't render my expensive degree completely useless?

We are facing the bitter truth that our educations, although among the best in the world, don't mean as much as they did in our parents' generation. Sadly, our parents don't seem

to understand that fact. Although around half of us live with our parents, according to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, our parents seem to think we are just being lazy about seeking a high-paying, high-powered job. This is compounded by the media image of recent graduates, embodied by those

Taco Bell “Good to Go” commercials, featuring a 20-something whiling away his time on his parents' couch playing video games. The cold, hard truth, however, is that the job market is tough, there is heavy competition, and college degrees don't mean as much as they did 20 years ago—unless they are advanced or professional degrees.

Perhaps the answer is in searching. Sure, the job market is tough, but it's been tough before and will eventually get better. Sure, a lot of my peers are still relying on their parents for financial support, but maybe we should be counting our blessings that our parents are able to do this for us, that they held education as a priority.

The process of writing this article has helped me tremendously in dealing with my emotions. I'm not alone. I'm not a freak. Maybe those nightmares

that I'm the last kid picked for kickball in gym class will slowly end.

I've quit my dead-end, joyless job, and I've not been happier since graduating from Vanderbilt. So maybe I haven't figured it all out, and I still don't really know where to go—but I'm not paralyzed anymore by my fears of being stuck in a job that I hate until I die from sheer boredom. I can keep searching. Jobs and cities—these things work themselves out in the end (I hope). I have within my power the ability to seek and strive and eventually find that job that provides a suitable standard of living and emotional fulfillment. But anyone who knows of a well-paying job in a sunny city involving something like touring beaches, high-stakes poker, or being a professional moviegoer is more than welcome to call me. I'm game. ▼