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“It’s Not About You” OPR

David Brooks’ thought-provoking New York Times article, titled “It’s Not About You,” primarily discusses the negative, deceptive influence of the ‘litanies’ of expressive individualism on graduate students upon their transition from college to real world pathways and careers. At the same time, Brooks aims to juxtapose the dichotomy between school and real life, based on factors such as guidance, structure, social relations, etc. Today’s graduates had been taught the indelible and clichéd mantra of their elders to follow their passion, chart their own course, and pursue their dreams, all while finding themselves along the way. However, in the real world, there’s a limit and commitment to everything, including marriage, settlement, communities, and personal vocations, though freedom and autonomy are consistently embraced throughout school life. Interestingly, Brooks exemplifies how personal callings are, to an extent, disillusioned after graduating college, evoking pity from readers, because today’s graduates encounter difficulties in discovering the career where their best interests lie, financial situations, as well as advanced skill requirements compared to previous generations, when job competition and population were significantly lower. Such an opinion is not representative of the entire graduate population, because there exists a number of individuals who achieve their dream career and goals based on their ambitions in high school/college, privileged upbringing, and/or educational achievements.

E.M. Forster, an early 20th century English novelist, effectively summarizes David Brooks’ purpose, “We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.” Justifiably, it’s true everything in life doesn’t proceed as planned, as humanity is an imperfect, unpredictable species. In acknowledgment of the article’s title, the world doesn’t revolve around one’s goals and vision, but rather works in miraculous ways that there comes a point when people must accept things happen for a reason. The author could be criticized for being unimaginative or timeworn for expressing a cold, direct truth about a few misleading expectations of the real world after college graduation, “They enter a bad job market, the hangover from decades of excessive borrowing. They inherit a ruinous federal debt.” (Brooks, 2011, pg. 1) He writes to convey an eye-opening message to prevent naïve students from expecting too much out of their personal goals and ambitions and growing disenchanted and equivocated after having not accomplished everything on their ‘bucket list’ from high school in a systematic manner. After all, although high school and college impose pressure on students to harness skills that determine their course and competency in the real world, it’s contradictory that the advice given by elders to pursue happiness and joy as a priority directly conflicts with doing as much as possible in high school to impress universities with college résumés. In order to achieve success, one must efficiently balance time management and high stress levels.

At the very end of the article, Brooks includes a generalization coinciding with the basis of his argument, “Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it’s nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task.” (Brooks, 2011, pg. 2) As members of an increasingly technological, streamlined, materialistic society, the notion of self-improvement derives particularly from the widespread inculcation that education and wealth are the definitive stimuli of success and leadership (a.k.a. survival of the fittest). Consequently, as population levels increment, and the competition for jobs and resources persists, guidance and structure begin to decline, as younger generations graduate college, grow older, and elder generations encompass a larger quota of society, while social relations become more essential in securing the blessings and wisdom of elder generations to pass on to the young to encourage prudent decisions and cultural preservation.