

To the Overwhelmed Class of 2023: Don't Be Underwhelming

Graduates are usually encouraged to embrace an optimistic future based on obvious economic or cultural signs that make this possible. However, the Class of 2023 does not have the luxury of this bright future. Too many major obstacles bar the way for these members of Generation Z.

If there was an expression to characterize this class, it might be "The Overwhelmed Class of 2023." These students faced and still confront challenges beyond their abilities to absorb them.

The trauma of COVID and unprecedented civil unrest upended their freshmen years. The later years saw tumultuous elections, economic turmoil, and war on distant shores. Their school year ends on the edge of an unresolved fiscal debt-ceiling cliff. The AI monster threatens to replace them as they seek the jobs for which they studied hard.

Truly Disproportional Challenges

All this is truly overwhelming, even for the adults who must advise graduates. One aggravating factor is that the massive liberal framework that helped deal with such problems for generations is crumbling. There is nothing there to replace it.

Thus, for many graduates, it might seem their entry into the real world is tinged with injustice. It is not fair that they should have to confront such a world in disarray. Others had it so much easier. The world owes them a better way out.

Faced with seemingly unsurmountable barriers, this class faces three temptations.

The Temptations of Underwhelming

The first temptation for “The Overwhelmed Class of 2023” is to be underwhelming. In the face of such disproportional challenges, graduates might feel inclined to think it is better to stop fighting and float along. Let “woke” facilitators step in to justify a slide into entitled mediocrity. Let the government, not God, intervene and provide for all needs.

This tendency for inertia is already seen in the job markets, where young candidates fail to show up or quit their jobs with ease. Given that the world’s problems are huge, underwhelming means a misplaced focus on self and gratification instead of duty or sanctification.

One recent trend among this generation is to go on “funemployment.” That is to say, to take time off to have fun before entering the job market or to sandwich fun between jobs. Implicit in this arrangement is the idea that the real purpose of life is fun, made possible by occasional work. Let others take care of the world’s big problems and responsibilities.

Disengaging From the World

The second temptation is to disengage from today’s crumbling world situation. Just ignore the decay and take no interest in current events.

Some graduates might reason that world problems are so big and complex that they interfere with the pursuit of self-interest and fun. Better to let these problems take care of themselves or leave them to the government, which is only too willing to assume control.

This temptation is to retreat into little social media worlds that serve as cyber-Benedict Options where one might await

with befriended others for improved times. However, this attempt at disengagement cannot replace real relationships and broader community links. Gen Zers live the contradiction of being the most connected generation . . . and the loneliest.

The Temptation to Escape

“Funemployment” and disengagement do not come without a cost. It leads to narcissistic, frustrating self-absorption; thus, the final temptation is to escape it all.

Unfortunately, the postmodern world opens up so many avenues of escape. It proposes postponements of family, career and adulthood through fun and entertainment. Technology facilitates the refusal to grow up with its gadgetry, video games and metaverses. The shallowness of an online world offers alternatives to the deep thinking needed to understand the things that really matter.

Worst of all, the darker sides of escape give rise to desperation with tragic consequences. Being underwhelming and disengaged are reflected in the alarming increase in death rates among young Americans driven by homicides, drug overdoses, car accidents and suicides. These deaths have reached their highest level in fifteen years. This escape cannot be an option for the class of 2023, overwhelmed as it might be.

Obvious Advice

Thus, the advice to the overwhelmed class of 2023 is “Don’t be underwhelming despite the immense pressure to be so.”

Such advice is not as hard as it sounds. Gen Zers have two advantages that other generations did not have.

First, they have much less attachment to the sterile secularism, selfish individualism and stifling materialism

still found in boomers and millennials. Many have seen the tragic consequence of the liberal paradigm that says happiness consists in doing whatever one wants. Broken families and restless lives allow them to see the false promises of what is left of modernity.

Second, Gen Zers are more open to searching for meaning and purpose. Despite a certain insecurity, they are more likely to be attracted to those things that speak to them of truth, goodness and beauty. If well evangelized, they marveled at the sublime mysteries of the Faith.

Gen Z's strong search for meaning is contrary to the temptation of being underwhelming.

Focus on Something Greater

A final counsel to this class is to act upon these advantages by focusing on something greater and more enchanting than self.

The Class of 2023 can overcome its overwhelming challenges by admiring those eternal and permanent Christian ideals that have always enthralled generations. Those who generously give themselves to what they admire and love find meaning and purpose.

This anti-liberal (and counter-cultural) proposal holds that there are high ideals that are worth more than life itself. Upon the platform of family, community and Church, one can overcome the temptation of disengagement by finding fulfillment in the service of God and others. Graduates should embrace great causes by combatting sin and immorality or setting standards of excellence that serve as models for all in society. Above all, graduates should seek the highest reason for existence: knowing, loving and serving God.

The curious effect of these acts of admiration and generosity

is that the person becomes transformed and, by God's grace, proportional to the challenges that must be faced.

Indeed, the overwhelmed class of 2023 can become overwhelming by becoming a shining beacon of faith and hope in a morally bankrupt and chaotic world.

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