

“The Best Days of Your Life?!?!”

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I got my first real six-string  
Bought it at the five-and-dime  
Played it 'til my fingers bled  
Was the summer of '69

Me and some guys from school  
Had a band and we tried real hard.  
Jimmy quit, Jody got married  
I should've known we'd never get far

Oh, when I look back now  
That summer seemed to last forever  
And if I had the choice  
Yeah, I'd always wanna be there  
Those were the best days of my life

[\*] Faculty colleagues, Whitman staff, and other members of the college community, . . .

. . . [\*] parents, family and friends of the incoming Whitman class of 2021, . . .

. . . and [\*] newest members of the Whitman College Student body, . . .

. . . Canadian rock star Bryan Adams and I welcome you to the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year, . . .

. . . and perhaps, for some of you, . . .

. . . to “the best days of your life” . . .

. . . as celebrated in the song clip which you just heard

There are several different interpretations as to what Mr. Adams had in mind when he wrote and recorded this song in 1984, . . .

. . . but, for me, it has always had its own personal significance . . .

. . . because “the summer of ‘69” . . .

. . . is when I graduated from Bates College

I don’t know that I would necessarily describe my four years as an undergraduate . . .

. . . as “**the best** days of my life,” . . .

. . . but I do know that every time I hear this song on my car radio or somewhere else, . . .

. . . it evokes powerful, poignant and sometimes bittersweet . .

. . . images of the time that I was in college

[\*] i.e., the many new and often challenging experiences that I had, . . .

. . . both in and outside of the classroom

[\*] the diverse relationships, . . .

. . . many of them with people that I never would have met . . .

. . . or even come into contact with . . .

. . . if I had remained in my small hometown . . .

. . . in western Massachusetts, . . .

. . . as did so many of my 47 fellow high school graduates that year

[\*] The personal triumphs (of which I had quite a few)

[\*] The personal disappointments (of which I had just as many)

[\*] The occasional flashes of self-awareness, . . .

. . . and the gradual acceptance of . . .

. . . who I would ultimately become as a person

[\*] On a somewhat lighter, but no less important, note, . . .

. . . The Quick and the Dead, . . .

. . . the very excellent rock 'n' roll band that some college friends and I put together, . . .

. . . pretty much following the script just laid out by Bryan Adams, . . .

. . . and the great times that I had with this band . . .

. . . playing gigs across the wilds of northern New England

My discovery of . . .

. . .and development of a passion for . . .

. . . the discipline of Sociology

An academic field that I didn't even know existed . . .

. . . when I began my college journey

And last, but certainly not least, . . .

. . . the fact that I met my first (and only) spouse . . .

. . . Nancy Tavelli, now an Associate Dean of Students here  
at Whitman, . . .

. . . at an all-campus dance . . .

. . . on a fortuitous Saturday evening . . .

. . . in the first month of my senior year



So, these were definitely important years for me

Impactful years

Mind-expanding years

Transformative years

Generally enjoyable years

The very best days of my life?

I'm not sure that I would go quite that far

But it's not an unreasonable assertion to ponder . . .

. . . as I look back at those four years of my young adult life . . .

. . . that culminated in . . .

. . . "the summer of '69"

And it thus seemed like an equally reasonable premise for the

members of our incoming class sitting in this audience . . .

. . . to similarly ponder . . .

. . . as you anticipate the college career . . .

. . . which you will all be experiencing . . .

. . . beginning in about 35 minutes

What might help to make these . . .

. . . “the best days of your life?”

And what might possibly get in the way of this happening?

And what can you do . . .

. . . as intelligent and capable human beings . . .

. . . to maximize the likelihood of this desired outcome?

As Dean Tipton indicated in her introductory remarks, . .

. . . I've been a professor here at Whitman for 40 years

During that time, . . .

. . . I've been fortunate enough to teach and otherwise  
work with . . .

. . . literally thousands of Whitman students

I thus feel in some sense . . .

. . . as though I already know who you all are, . . .

. . . and where you have come from . . .

. . . and what exactly makes you tick, . . .

. . . and how you are likely to conduct yourselves at Whitman

Based upon this lifetime of past experiences . . .

. . . with the students who have preceded you, . . .

. . . I'm inclined to have great confidence that the vast majority  
of you will . . .

. . . do the kinds of things that will help you to . . .

. . . enjoy considerable success during . . .

. . . your time at Whitman

I believe that you will take our academic enterprise seriously

That you will throw yourselves . . .

. . . not only into your classes, . . .

. . . but also into the wide range of Whitman activities that  
are available

And that you will pursue excellence at every turn

It may take some of you a little bit of time . . .

. . . “to find your sea legs,” . . .

. . . and to believe that we really are serious . . .

. . . in all of the work that we assign, . . .

. . . and our expectations for your performance on that work

But you’ll figure it out in most cases

I’m really not too worried about that

I'm also quite confident asserting that the institution of higher learning . . .

. . . of which you are now a part . . .

. . . is fully capable of providing many of you . . .

. . . with the best days of your lives

Indeed, Whitman College has a large number of great strengths and attributes in this regard

These include (if I may be a bit immodest for a moment), . . .

. . . [\*] the caring and committed and highly knowledgeable faculty members . . .

. . . seated in the first several rows of this auditorium



You simply can't do much better than this . . .

. . . in assembling a college faculty

[\*] A traditional liberal arts curriculum . . .

. . . which is broad and challenging and rigorous

[\*] Staff who are student-oriented and tremendously  
dedicated

[\*] Great and ever-improving resources and facilities

[\*] A highly supportive and very prosocial student culture

I realize that I probably sound a bit like the kind of marketing

materials . . .

. . . with which you have been bombarded in recent  
months, . . .

. . . but I honestly do believe, . . .

. . . in my heart of hearts, . . .

. . . that our institution does deliver upon what it  
promises . . .

. . . for the great majority of students . . .

. . . who pass through its doors

Now I do want to caution you that, . . .

. . . if you should ever find yourselves, . . .

. . . at any point in your college career, . . .

. . . not quite fitting in, . . .

. . . or lacking direction, . . .

. . . or doubting your ability to survive in this very demanding  
place, . . .

. . . please don't hesitate to take advantage of the many caring  
members of the Whitman community . . .

. . . in the residence halls . . .

. . . or in the various administrative offices . . .

. . . whose purpose it is to help you deal with . . .

. . . these very common issues

Or, alternatively, go in and consult with a faculty member who you have met . . .

. . . and who you trust . . .

. . . and feel comfortable talking to

I've had innumerable such discussions in my office in Maxey Hall through the years, . . .

. . . and I can assure you that these feelings of doubt . . .

. . . and uncertainty . . .

. . . and lack of self-confidence . . .

. . . are much more common than you might imagine, . . .

. . . as you sit here on this happy afternoon

I think that you will be reassured of this fact . . .

. . . when you attend the powerful “Voices of Whitman”  
program . . .

. . . on Monday evening

There, I’m quite sure that you will see that . . .

. . . it’s not as though the people who go to school here . . .

. . . don’t face major challenges from time to time

They most certainly do, simply by virtue of being human  
beings, . . .

. . . working within a challenging . . .

. . . and sometimes stressful . . .

. . . academic environment

However, each in their own way, . . .

. . . Whitman students seem to demonstrate the resilience . . .

. . . which allows them to persevere . . .

. . . even when they're not personally sure that they have it in  
them to do so

While we are talking about some of the aspects of Whitman College . . .

. . . which might be most relevant to . . .

. . . incoming students like yourselves, . . .

. . . there is one more aspect of the college that I would like to call to your attention

These are the “core values” . . .

. . . which help to define who we are, . . .

. . . and what we stand for

The core values . . .

. . . of which I am speaking here . . .

. . . are probably fairly similar . . .

. . . from college to college . . .

. . . in American higher education

However, that doesn't make them any less important . . .

. . . in defining the essence of our institutional identity . . .

. . . and providing us . . .

. . . – all of us – with a basic moral compass



Now, I hasten to add that . . .

. . . what I am going to be talking about here . . .

. . . are several of “the core principles of Whitman” . . .

. . . as I happen to see the world

There is plenty of room . . .

. . . and much impetus . . .

. . . within our community . . .

. . . for difference of interpretation, . . .

. . . and even outright disagreement, . . .

. . . on just about every topic that one can imagine

We don't, . . .

. . . nor should we, . . .

. . . all see things the same way

Be that as it may, however, . . .

. . . I do feel as though I am on pretty solid ground . . .

. . . in identifying, . . .

. . . and briefly elaborating upon, . . .

. . . two (of a much larger number) . . .

. . . of these core values . . .

. . . which, together, form our institutional identity

(1) First, it is a fundamental core value at Whitman College . . .

. . . that **all people** have basic and equal worth . . .

. . . regardless of their race . . .

. . . and/or the color of their skin, . . .

. . . or the church that they attend (if any) . . .

. . . or the God to whom they pray (if any), . . .

. . . or the amount of wealth that their family  
possesses . . .

. . . (or, conversely, fails to possess) . . .

. . . or the sexual characteristics with which they  
were born, . . .

. . . or the gender with which they prefer to  
identify, . . .

. . . or the nature of their political views

All of you new students in the audience . . .

. . . are truly welcome here

You belong here

You have a place here

In fact, this is now your place

And you can thus expect to be treated with respect, . . .

. . . as a person of worth . . .

. . . by all members of our campus community . . .

. . . with whom you happen to come into contact

As I originally wrote, . . .

. . . and am now reading this statement to you, . . .

. . . the words sound so blatantly obvious

Why do I even have to bother asserting this truism . . .

. . . at this time and in this place?

Well, unfortunately, . . .

. . . in fact, tragically, . . .

. . . recent events . . .

. . . have painfully shown us . . .

. . . that this truth is anything but self-evident . . .

. . . and universally accepted . . .

. . . in our nation today

So let me be clear in reaffirming . . .

. . . what most of you already know . . .

. . . and hopefully share complete agreement with

This principle of equality for all is accepted, . . .

. . . and is in fact embraced unequivocally, . . .

. . . here at Whitman College

(2) A second core value at Whitman . . .

. . . follows closely the point that I just made . . .

. . . relating to the importance of all of **you** . . .

. . . indeed, all of **us**, . . .

. . . as members of this campus community

Clearly, along with diversity of **identity** . . .

. . . comes a diversity of **viewpoints**, . . .

. . . and opinions, . . .

. . . and perspectives

Since we are not all alike . . .

. . . there is no reason to believe . . .

. . . that we will all see the world in the same way

However, from the standpoint of the learning . . .

. . . which is central to our institutional mission . . .

. . . it is clearly the case that all of us in the Whitman community . . .

. . . benefit from exposure to . . .

. . . thoughts and ideas and opinions . . .

. . . that are different from our own



Consistent with this educational principle, then, . . .

. . . please have no doubt that . . .

. . . all of you entering Whitman today . . .

. . . are allowed – . . .

. . . and in fact encouraged – . . .

. . . to believe and express . . .

. . . what you think . . .

. . . about pretty much any issue imaginable

We . . .

. . . meaning the college and its faculty and its staff . . .

. . . don't try to monitor, . . .

. . . or control, . . .

. . . or censor . . .

. . . the expression of ideas at Whitman

We always . . .

. . . want you to think

But we'll never tell you . . .

. . . what to think

As I make this categorical claim, . . .

. . . I do have to note that, . . .

. . . as desirable as this core principle is on philosophical  
grounds, . . .

. . . I can't say that it is always put into practice  
seamlessly . . .

. . . on college campuses like our own

Indeed, the expression of . . .

. . . – and even more pointedly, the debate between -- . . .

. . . ideas and perspectives and worldviews . . .

. . . that differ from one another – . . .

. . . sometimes dramatically, . . .

. . . and oftentimes held very passionately – . . .

. . . can be messy, . . .

. . . and sometimes even hurtful and divisive

It is an ongoing “problem” of democracy . . .

. . . to determine . . .

. . . where freedom of speech . . .

. . . and the uncontrolled expression of ideas, . . .

. . . has its limits, . . .

. . . (if, in fact, it should have any limits) . . .

. . . and when the expression of certain unpopular and perhaps even injurious ideas . . .

. . . crosses whatever line(s) we have tried to draw . . .

. . . to prevent the harming or wounding . . .

. . . of our fellow citizens . . .

. . . in ways that are clearly and simply unacceptable

This is a difficult issue to resolve in the abstract, . . .

. . . and all the more so when we are discussing ideas . . .

. . . relating to race, gender, and justice

In recent years, as many of you know, . . .

. . . other college campuses across the country . . .

. . . -- places like Yale and Middlebury and Evergreen -- . . .

. . . have stumbled, at least temporarily . . .

. . . when trying to find and maintain this balance

This is not the venue . . .

. . . and I am not the person . . .

. . . to suggest a one-size-fits-all resolution . . .

. . . of this large and thorny issue, . . .

. . . but suffice it to say for present purposes, . . .

. . . that you should never feel discouraged or “chilled” . . .

. . . when wishing to express your ideas in our classrooms, . . .

. . . or in residence hall discussions with your peers, . . .

. . . or in the school paper, . . .

. . . or in campus advocacy of one kind or another, . . .

. . . whatever your cause might be

However, one implication of this inherent tension . . .

. . . which I encourage you all to all be very aware of . . .

. . . and to devote at least a little bit of thought to . . .

. . . is the fact that, as members of our community, . . .

. . . you now have a responsibility . . .

. . . to think of the others with whom you share this space, . . .

. . . and to seriously consider the best interests of the collective  
as a whole, . . .

. . . as well as all of its individual members, . . .

. . . when you say the things that you want to say



There are consequences to words . . .

. . . as well as deeds

This does not equate, in my opinion, . . .

. . . to censorship . . .

. . . or to being silenced or stifled

Neither is it mere “political correctness, “ . . .

. . . as that term is now pejoratively used

But it does call our attention to . . .

. . . the important need for all of us to be mindful of . . .

. . . those situations in which . . .

. . . our words may really hurt or harm someone in our campus  
community

And it also suggests (I hope) our recommitment to . . .

. . . principles of tolerance and civility . . .

. . . -- two qualities which unfortunately seem to be in  
decreasing supply . . .

. . . in the world in which we live

## Transition to Conclusion!!!

It has probably occurred to some of you that, . . .

. . . in trying to determine the likelihood . . .

. . . of you new students in this audience . . .

. . . enjoying “the best days of your life” here at Whitman, . . .

. . . I have only had time to address those factors . . .

. . . (a) specifically relating to your own personal qualities . . .

. . . as individual people, . . .

. . . as well as (b) basic characteristics of this particular  
educational institution, . . .

. . . both of which I firmly believe . . .

. . . to be at the ready . . .

. . . to maximize your success and happiness here

However, there is obviously . . .

. . . a whole set of other “external” factors . . .

. . . over which neither you nor the college . . .

. . . have any real control during the next four years

Just as my own college years were beset by such events as . . .

. . . [\*] the pursuit of, . . .

. . . but powerful resistance to, . . .

. . . Civil Rights for African-Americans, . . .

. . . [\*] a costly and controversial military conflict in Southeast

Asia , . . .

. . . and [\*] a number of devastating political assassinations, . . .

... your college years will almost certainly be affected by ...

... a number of 21<sup>st</sup> century issues and problems, ...

... that are now solidly entrenched in ...

... national and international economies and ways of life

These include (to name but a few) ...

[\*] deep ideological divisions within our society, and the world more generally ...

[\*] uncertainty and destabilization, ...

... throughout many of the political systems of the world, ...

... including our own

[\*] the possible specter of nuclear war, ...

[\*] and severe threats to environmental viability

How can it not be the case . . .

. . . that factors such as these will necessarily impact, . . .

. . . -- perhaps dramatically --, . . .

. . . the question of whether or not these prove to be . . .

. . . “the best days of your life”?

You certainly can't, . . .

. . . or at least I hope that you won't, . . .

. . . continually obsess about the problems of . . .

. . . the world beyond Whitman . . .

. . . as you embark upon your college career

I did a bit of that during the first couple of years . . .

. . . of my own college experience, . . .

. . . and it proved to be to no one's benefit

Certainly not my own

The imperfect world was still there when I graduated from  
college

Please note, however, . . .

. . . that while I'm recommending that you keep your eye  
squarely on the ball . . .

. . . as you go about the business of being a college student . . .

. . . -- which is, after all, . . .

. . . your primary reason for being here -- . . .

. . . I am certainly not suggesting . . .

. . . that you ignore . . .

. . . or turn a blind eye to . . .

. . . all that is happening in the larger world . . .

. . . beyond us here in Walla Walla



These national and international . . .

. . . events and realities are important, . . .

. . . and they will inevitably be shaping the world in which you currently live . . .

. . . and the world into which you will graduate . . .

. . . in four short years

So, please . . .

[\*] Read the papers

[\*] Keep up with the news

[\*] Talk about important issues with friends or faculty and staff

[\*] Support whatever causes you believe in

[\*] Become involved in our local community

In short, remain (or become) . . .

. . . a concerned citizen

It is definitely in your interest . . .

In fact, it is in all of our interest . . .

. . . for you to do so

On something of a personal closing note, . . .

. . . I was born and raised in . . .

. . . a very small working class town, . . .

. . . in New England, . . .

. . . and no one in my family to that point . . .

. . . had ever finished college

My parents, however, were bound and determined . . .

. . . that I would go to college, . . .

. . . so there was simply . . .

. . . never any doubt in my mind . . .

. . . that this would be my future . . .

. . . after high school

Truth be known, . . .

. . . I owe them a tremendous debt . . .

. . . for putting into play the chain of events . . .

. . . that has ultimately resulted in my having the privilege . . .

. . . of standing up here before you today . . .

. . . on this wonderful occasion

I'm not sure that I ever thanked them sufficiently . . .

. . . when they were alive

So I'll just thank them now . . .

. . . with this public acknowledgement

Now, with the hindsight that comes many, many years

later, . . .

. . . and as a father of two adult daughters . . .

. . . who has been on both sides of . . .

. . . the student-parent hug . . .

. . . that customarily takes place . . .

. . . when this period of “college drop-off” has drawn to a

close, . . .

. . . I respectfully offer this recommendation . . .

. . . to all of you incoming students

As your mothers and fathers, . . .

. . . and any other close family members or friends who are still  
here, . . .

. . . are getting ready to leave you **here** . . .

. . . in your new world, . . .

. . . as they return to the world that you **have just left**, . . .

. . . I urge you not to underestimate . . .

. . . just how significant a defining moment this is likely . . .

. . . to be for them, . . .

. . . as it is for you

For this reason, . . .

. . . you may well want to let that goodbye hug linger a little bit longer than it normally would, . . .

. . . and maybe even tell them (again) . . .

. . . that you love them

And if your parents or other close family members were not able to accompany you to Walla Walla this fall, . . .

. . . or if they have already left to return home, . . .

. . . you might want to give them a call, . . .

. . . or at least text or e-mail them, . . .

. . . to let them know that you are thinking of them

This is definitely a transformative time . . .

. . . for everyone involved . . .

. . . no less so for your parents than you

Please be sure to . . .

. . . lock it in your memory bank . . .

. . . forever

You'll be glad to have it there



With that said, . . .

. . . I am delighted to . . .

. . . welcome you to . . .

. . . the beginnings of . . .

. . . what will hopefully be . . .

. . . some of . . .

. . . “the best days of your life”