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The Crucial first 40 days: A Perfect Storm

'She's comin' on boys, and she's comin' on strong!'

These were the final recorded words of Captain Billy Tyne of the Andrea Gail. On September 20, 1991 the crew of six set out for what would be the final voyage of this 75-foot fishing vessel. After thirty-nine days of moderately good luck fishing in the waters of the North Atlantic, the United States Coast Guard received the final radio transmission from the Andrea Gail. At 6:00pm on the evening of October 28, 1991, Captain Billy Tyne reported his coordinates and gave a weather report indicating 30-foot seas and wind gusts of up to 80 knots. His transmission ended with the fateful words, 'She's comin' on boys, and she's comin' on strong!' Forty days after departing from Massachusetts the Andrea Gail was pronounced 'lost at sea'.

The crew of the Andrea Gail had found themselves at sea when a weather phenomenon known as a 'Nor'easter' had descended upon the North Atlantic with all its fury. Two low pressure areas merged with high pressure areas and these met up with warm air from the south, and cold air from the north, as well as moisture feeding into the storm from the Gulf Stream to create a catastrophic storm. This simultaneous occurrence of events taken individually would be far less powerful than was the result of their chance combination. In fact, had the storm been more concentrated, it might have resembled a hurricane, which would have triggered the appropriate warnings. But because the storm occurred without the typical hurricane warnings, the Andrea Gail and her crew were caught off-guard. There had never been a storm like this in recorded history. This was the 'Perfect Storm'.

Although an extensive air and sea search was launched by the New York Air National Guard, the United States Coast Guard, and the Canadian Coast Guard. On November 8, 1991, after 11 days of searching covering over 116,000 square nautical miles, the search was called off after the Andrea Gail's Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) was discovered washed up on the shore of Sable Island, near Nova Scotia. All six crew members were lost at sea, presumed dead. The ship and crew have never been found.

Freshmen and The Perfect Storm

About the same time each year, near the middle of September, thousands of high school graduates set sail for a voyage of their own known as the Freshman Year. Like the crew of the Andrea Gail, these students have high hopes and big dreams about the adventure that stretches out over the horizon. They proceed with little thought of what major difficulties they might encounter, and wouldn't even dream of any sort of catastrophe. However, during their first 40 days on campus, many of them experience a 'Nor'easter' of their own, in the form of a huge transition and transformation in their own lives. Pressure to succeed meets with expectations and anticipation for the future, this merges with the excitement and new-found freedom that comes from being on your own. The simultaneous occurrence of all of this combines to bring about the possibility of a catastrophic event. In all likelihood, each of these events taken individually would be far less powerful than the result of their inevitable combination. In fact, if these events were to be more widely known, they would trigger the appropriate warnings and solutions that would give students and their families the tools necessary to weather the storm. But these warnings often come too late, or not at all.

It is crucial that students know what to expect before they set sail for college. From these realistic expectations can come an awareness and an understanding of what to anticipate and how to handle these first 40 days of their freshman year. Going to college represents an enormous transition and numerous challenges. It is an extremely exciting time, but also a time of great change. It represents an almost overnight passage from being a teenager, with limited freedom and responsibility, to becoming an adult with seemingly unlimited freedom and responsibility. This may sound wonderful, and the media and movies have painted a picture of this transition as pure fun and carefree enjoyment. But as Peter Parker learned from his uncle in Spiderman, 'With great power comes great responsibility'. So it also is with the college freshman.

Given the right preparation, the right tools and a realistic picture of what college is and what you can expect, the transition can be much easier and more fulfilling. Please don't get me wrong. I am not trying to throw a wet towel on the fire of excitement about going to college. Quite to the contrary. For most, college will represent one of the most exciting times of your life - one that as an adult people often look back on with fondness and even a longing to return to those years. I think that's great! Students just need to know what to expect and how to handle those crucial first few weeks of their freshman year. The importance of those first 40 days from your arrival on campus until Mid-term Exams and Thanksgiving Break cannot be understated. If you can be successful during this time (and I know you can be), you will lay a strong foundation upon which the rest of your college experience can be built.

I often hear, 'Drop out of college? Not me, not gonna happen!' Are you sure? Studies have shown that only about 1/3 of all new freshmen make it to their sophomore year. In fact, fewer than half of all new freshmen will graduate from college. Hard to believe, isn't it? Is college really that tough? Actually, the answer is both yes and no! It *is* difficult because of all that is going on in your life at the same time, but the greatest challenge comes not from college itself, but from **not knowing what to expect**. Most incoming freshman are simply unprepared for what lies ahead.

The transition from high school to college is one of the biggest transitions you will face. In fact, it is likely the biggest transition you have confronted in your 18 years on the planet! And look around you. Have you seen any media coverage of this transition? Any special reports about the transition from high school to college? The answer to those questions is a resounding 'NO!' Multiple books, and plenty of articles and coverage is given to the 'preschool years', the

'elementary school years', and even the 'transition from elementary to junior high and high school'. But our society simply has no clue about what is going on during this time in your life, and if they do, they have decided that it is simply not exciting enough to talk about on the evening news. Sure, they have special reports when a 'frat party' turns ugly or when there is some sort of tragedy on campus. Each fall, hundreds of thousands of students are taken to college and dropped off by their loved ones. The media may cover, 'Move in Day', but they usually mention only that most campus costs have skyrocketed and that there is not enough room in the residence halls for the number of students entering college (stay tuned, for more on that later!). But for the media, the story ends there, and you are the one left trying to figure out what to do.

The impact of your freshman year is something that you shouldn't underestimate. What you do in your freshman year **will** have an impact on all the rest of your college years. A lot of graduates believe that they can blow off their freshman year, just pick up the pieces and move on through their remaining years. However, when you blow off your freshman year, the experience can leave you reeling. It is as if you are forced to play catch-up for your remaining 3 years, always looking back wondering why you didn't take your freshman year seriously ... TAKE IT SERIOUSLY! You will have no regrets if you take it seriously, but it is almost guaranteed that you will regret it if you make a joke out of your first year. The foundation that you establish in the first few weeks will have an **enormous** impact on your future in school and beyond. You have to make a choice about how you deal with this. Mom and Dad can no longer force you to 'do the right thing'. You have to decide to do this on your own.

Imagine a scenario in which you have laid a strong foundation. When you are building a house, the strong concrete foundation is crucial. So crucial in fact, that the City Inspector will not allow you to proceed until it is perfect. He understands that a poor foundation can mean destruction for the home. Similarly, you are building your own foundation in these first 40 days of your freshman year. If you take this seriously, you will find it much easier to handle the difficult academic aspects because you are able to build on a strong foundation. On the other hand, picture a house built on a foundation that was not taken seriously, and didn't pass inspection. As you continue building, that foundation can become your worst enemy, as you are forced to adapt each year to accommodate the fact that you did not take this time seriously.

The Freshman 40?

So why are we focusing on the 'Freshman 40'? The Freshman 40 refers to the 40 days from when you arrive on campus to when you go through Mid-Term Exams and then head home for Thanksgiving Break. **These days are crucial to your success in college**. You will be shocked by all that you are hit with in your freshman year. I want to help you not be so blindsided by all these unknowns that you become another statistic. I am not referring to being shocked by bad stuff. I am referring to simply being overwhelmed by the amount of 'stuff' that you will be learning and experiencing. Add to that staying up until all hours of the night, not eating healthy food, and trying to adapt to living in a community with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other students. The combination of all of these things will bring about 'the perfect storm' in your life. But your story doesn't need to end like the Andrea Gail's. On the 39th day of your freshman year the storm may be unbelievable, and you may be totally exhausted, but you CAN make it through. And on the 40th day, rather than complete silence, your transmission home may be: "she's comin' on and she's comin' on strong - but I'm going to make it and will see you soon back at home". If you want

the pride of transmitting this home, you need to build a foundation of your own upon which these principles can rest. So, I have mixed up the concrete for you, and I'm ready to show you how to pour it to form the foundation. Let's build it together.